



Magnetism

OUTCASTDEITY

Return to Hogwarts

Platform 9 and $\frac{3}{4}$ was alive with magical energy and the hustle and bustle of another year of students returning to Hogwarts. Cats, rats and toads prowled and jumped underfoot, and above were the screeches of owls as they said hello to their owl-friends after a long summer. Steam filled the air, and the Hogwarts Expresses whistled impatiently, waiting for its turn to run.

Remus Lupin stood with his father, brushing his fringe to one side in an aggravated way, and looking around the station for his friends. It had been a long year without Sirius Black around to spew jokes, and he had only seen Padfoot and Prongs once in the summer holidays. He was looking forward to returning back to Hogwarts with the rest of the Marauders... well, most of the Marauders. He gulped audibly, trying to push thoughts of Peter to the back of his mind once more.

"Are you all set?" Asked Lyall, checking his watch. He'd have to return to the Ministry soon, but he had taken the time to see his son off, as Hope was unable to access the platform. Remus nodded, turning round to give his father a quick, one-armed hug, and then making his way onto the train. He waved out the window, but his eyes were still scanning the platform for his friends.

He searched a couple of carriages, in case they had made it onto the Express before him, but when he came up short he settled himself down into an empty one ready to wait for them. Not ten minutes later, a tall, long-haired boy entered his carriage. He had his trunk in one hand, and opened the door with the other. When he saw the werewolf sat in the compartment a soft smile erupted on his face.

"Hey beautiful." He sighed, pushing himself and his trunk into the compartment. Remus rolled his eyes at the pet-name, standing to help Sirius lift his luggage onto the overhead rail. It was easy to do when you had werewolf strength in your bones. Both boys sat down facing each other, and an awkward silence settled over them. It was the first time they'd been alone since the incident last year when Sirius had been excluded. Remus crossed his arms over his chest.

He'd forgiven Sirius, after many apologies via owls, and a long hard think about what his life would be like without the Black heir, but it was still awkward between them. Sirius sat forward in his chair, looking Remus directly in the eye.

"I want you to know..." He began. "I will never be so stupid again. I will never, ever, take advantage of your condition again."

Remus grunted a response.

"You've already said as much." He grumbled, then sighed, pushing his fringe out of his eyes again. He desperately needed a haircut – he usually got Sirius to do it, as the boy was pretty good with his hair-styling spells, but they'd barely spoken enough for Remus to breach the subject. "Look, let's just... let's just enjoy the year."

Sirius breathed out a little sigh, but no more could be said on the subject as at that moment their third, and now last, friend entered the carriage. James had obviously managed to get his eating under control since the year before, and had begun to earn back some of the muscle he had lost to Cinis. He still looked more fragile than Remus was used to, but it was nice to see the Chaser smiling. Remus shot another glance at Sirius on James' arrival – he knew if not for the Potter heir having long talks with Snape regarding the incident, Sirius might not be sitting there at all.

He entered the compartment and Remus once again helped him get his trunk onto the overhead

compartment. James rushed out of the room, and then thirty seconds later entered again carrying a small cage.

"What is that?" Sirius asked, pointing towards the box. James smiled sheepishly.

"Well, it's a cat."

Remus rose his eyebrow, peering into the cage to see brown, tabby fur similar to that of McGonagall's animagus form. Sirius was also looking at James as if he'd gone mad.

"Why in Merlin's name would get a cat?"

James plonked himself down next to Remus, placing his new pet next to him on the bench, in its carrier. He shrugged in response. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small badge. For a brief second Remus thought it might be a prefect badge, but then realised no one in their right mind would make James a prefect, plus no one got made prefect in their sixth year, so it had to be something else.

"Quidditch Captain?" Sirius asked, a sense of awe to his voice. James nodded.

"So mum and dad wanted to get me something big to congratulate me and well... since we no longer need to worry about anyone eating..." He trailed off, making an odd gesture they all knew meant he had wanted to say Wormtail. "So I got a cat."

There was an awkward silence where they all separately thought about going into their next school year without the fourth marauder, then Remus clapped his hands together.

"A cat, huh."

James nodded, pulling the feline out of its carrier and placing it in his lap. He gave it a few strokes, and Remus noted it was small, like a kitten.

"Her name is Jinx. It's supposed to be, you know, ironic. She's totally non-magical."

She opened her eyes and gave Remus a mistrustful look, and then curled up in James' lap and fell back asleep. James gently moved her back to her carrier, mumbling about not wanting to lose her. Remus suddenly had a flash back to last year, when he'd spent a long time searching for Regulus Black's made up feline 'Yeti'.

He smiled fondly at the memory as another person entered their carriage.

"Can I sit here?"

Remus looked up to see a shock of red-hair and a light yellow summer dress. Lily had become a sort of ally since Pete and Sirius had left the year before, and her presence had become customary – but he and James both knew she was really there to see Sirius. The dog-animagus gave her a dazzling grin, patting the seat next to him so she could join their group. She smiled, folding her dress underneath her as she sat down. The two of them instantly began talking in rapid, hushed tones about things they had done and seen over the summer. Apparently Sirius had spent most of the summer alternating between being at the Potters' and seeing Lily.

There was another knock, and finally the train jostled into life, sending them all on their way to Hogwarts. They all looked up towards the door to see Severus Snape standing in the doorway. He had already changed into his school uniform and he had gained another couple of inches over the summer so that his robes were beginning to get a little small for him. He'd taken to wearing his

long, lanky hair up now, and Remus had to admit it did look slightly better on him. His pale, swallow skin was stretched thin over his face as he grimaced, surveying their carriage. Remus whipped his head round to watch James, who was, true to form, staring at Snape with a look of awe, and slight tint of fear.

"You." Snape said, pointing at James, "Come with me."

James immediately obeyed, exiting their carriage with a quick wave of his hand, and following Snape down the corridor. Remus could see them go from his seat, and watched until they turned the corner – James following behind Severus, keeping his head low.

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"Sit."

James obediently sat down on the seats of the empty carriage they had found. Regulus Black had been sitting there, but when Snape entered, with James trailing behind, he quickly excused himself. The Gryffindor looked up at his Slytherin. Over the last year they had grown closer than he had ever thought possible – James had spent all of the time Sirius had been visiting Lily, with Snape. They had even managed to convince their respective parents to allow them to have a couple of nights together in the Leaky Cauldron before term began, on the pretence of being close to Diagon Alley for their school things, which James was unlikely to forget any time soon. He smirked at the memory.

Severus heavily deposited himself opposite the boy.

"I have an order for you." He said, making James tense slightly and look around to make sure no one was about. Severus' orders, as of late, had tended to stray into the more personal regions. Nevertheless, he nodded. "I want you to forget everything that happened last year."

James instantly protested.

"What are you saying?"

Severus rolled his eyes.

"I am saying I want you to forget we made this deal. I want... I want you to know that even if you never did a single thing I asked I would still make the Elixir for you." He said. James was glad he was sitting down; he was sure that if he wasn't his legs might have given away beneath him. He breathed out a puff of hot air. Severus frowned down at his own knees, twisting his hands in and out of one-another, as he tried to think of the next thing to say. Eventually he sighed and looked up, catching eye-contact with the newly appointed Quidditch Captain. "What I am saying is... I want us to start... fresh. And I am here asking you, not ordering you, but asking you..." He huffed, looking to one side in a gesture that James found oddly adorable.

"Are you... Merlin, Sev, are you asking me out?"

Severus stood in a hurry, heading to the door as if trying to escape, but James caught his arm.

"Wait. Just... if you were, I would... I would like that."

Severus stopped his attempt to leave and turned round to look at the Gryffindor with a mistrustful look in his eyes. He ripped his arm away from the Chaser, and slowly, almost so that James couldn't even see it, nodded his head.

"I am." He admitted. "There is a Hogsmeade weekend the first weekend of term – I would like it if you would accompany me."

James had to look at the ground to try and hide his smile. He found it strange that he would be so elated by this turn of events, when less than a year ago he would have punched someone for even suggesting he found the Slytherin anything more than a bat. Eventually he nodded.

"Okay. I'll meet you by the greenhouses?"

Severus nodded.

"Good. Now -" He smirked. "Come here."

He sat back down and patted his knee, making James flush. He looked once more out of the carriage, and quickly pulled down the blind over the door, before crossing the room to settle down on his Slytherin's lap.

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Remus exited his carriage with a sigh, glancing behind him at Sirius and Lily, who had quickly forgone the pretence of chattiness and moved on to sucking face. He tried not to revert back to his pre-teen years of making gagging noises, and quickly removed himself from the situation. Once he had closed the door behind him he took a quick step back, only to stumble into the youngest Black sibling.

"Oh, Regulus." He exclaimed, hand jumping to his fringe to push it out of the way again. Regulus' eyes followed his movements, and the werewolf found himself becoming highly self-conscious about his overgrown locks. He'd spent the majority of the last year trying to ignore his stupid little crush on the boy, but he hadn't been very successful.

"Lupin." Regulus greeted, looking past him into the carriage. "I was hoping to speak with my brother."

Remus nodded, of course he was. He gestured behind him.

"He's a little busy with his girlfriend right now." He replied. "You're probably just as well to leave it until later if you can." He advised. Regulus made a face at the words 'busy' and 'girlfriend' that perfectly summed up how Remus inwardly felt.

The fourth year stepped backwards and leant against the wall, tucking his curls behind his ears. He was dressed in the Black idea of muggle clothing – smart black trousers and a black shirt that he had neglected to do up the top two buttons of, revealing the pale skin over his collarbones. It took a lot of Remus' strength to rip his eyes away from the sight. He had hoped upon hearing his brother was otherwise engaged the younger teenager might retreat back to his own friends, but it appeared he had other plans. He gave Remus a cheeky smile that was eerily reminiscent of his older brother.

"So, Sirius has Lily, Potter has Severus... Pettigrew has abandoned ship." He stated. "Looks like you're in for a lonely year."

Remus surveyed the boy with suddenly hard eyes, upon hearing the name of their former friend. He coughed slightly before replying.

"I am sure I'll find something to fill my time with." He responded.

"Or someone." Regulus replied, holding eye-contact in a way that was almost challenging. Remus

gulped audibly.

"Are you offering?" He asked, voice coming out husky in a way he wasn't proud of. The youngest Black smirked, making Remus worry he'd been caught out on his little crush.

Eventually the younger teen shrugged.

"There's a Hogsmeade weekend the moment term begins – I assume you'll be staying at Hogwarts and studying?"

Remus held his breath. He stupidly wanted to believe this was the younger boy's roundabout way of asking him on a date, but even if it was he could hardly parade himself around with Sirius' younger brother in Hogsmeade – the older Black would kill him if he found out about Remus' less than pure feelings towards his sibling.

"I have NEWTS next year; I have to be prepared." He attempted to excuse himself, thinking the boy's assumption about his weekend activities was a hundred percent correct. With Sirius and Lily destined to spend the entire weekend in Madam Puddifoot's and Severus and James probably spending the weekend holed up in the dungeons, he hadn't fancied a trip into the village solo.

Regulus shrugged.

"Okay. But the whole school will be in Hogsmeade." He pressed, glancing towards the carriage where his brother was still making out with Lily. "Maybe we can study together."

He said study in a way that suggested they would be doing anything but studying.

Remus found himself nodding along dumbly.

He thought for one stupid second that he might confirm whether what Regulus was suggesting was a sort of secret date, but then the door to the carriage they were outside of swung open and Sirius stood in the hallway looking dishevelled.

"Reg!" He exclaimed, opening his arms as if he expected the younger boy to hug him. Regulus, of course, did nothing of the sort.

"Sirius." He greeted formally, instead. Sirius sent a brief look between his brother and Remus.

"Are you two friends now?" He asked, voice calm, but eyes suggesting he found the situation odd. Remus went to vehemently deny any connection to Regulus, but the Slytherin rolled his eyes, pushing forward into the cabin, where Lily was tying her hair into plaits.

"I just bumped into him on my way to see you." He replied calmly. Remus marvelled at his ability to stay so calm and blatantly lie to his brother.

"Oh." Replied Sirius, and the two of them began chatting. They talked of how Sirius' father, Orion, wanted to see him, and how Regulus thought he might join the Slytherin team as a beater and wanted some tips from his brother – but Remus mostly tuned it out in favour of watching the younger boy's Adam's Apple bob up and down in his throat as he talked.

"You're staring." Lily whispered to him a little while later, and he found he had no excuse ready to refute her.

Study

Remus entered the library feeling uncharacteristically nervous, fiddling with the hem of his school robes and adjusting his tie. Strictly speaking on a Saturday he had no obligation to wear the unrelenting uniform, but having spent hours in front of the mirror trying on different outfits he had eventually decided he would be most comfortable in what he wore daily. Many pure-bloods wore their robes even on weekends anyway, so it wasn't so strange.

Sirius had left early to pick Lily up, with the rest of the school, in the lobby; and even though Remus had expected James to be stealing his way down to the dungeons under the invisibility cloak he was pleasantly surprised to hear that he was actually going to leave for Hogsmeade with Snape – in plain sight of everyone. Which had left Remus some time to focus on his appearance for his study-date with the younger Black sibling. He'd managed to get Sirius to cut his hair, and had swept it back – pinning it in place with some Sneekeazy, and he had applied a liberal amount of body-spray his mother had bought for him. Eventually, he had felt content enough to go and find Regulus in the tall shelves of the Hogwarts Library.

He sat down at one of the tables when a quick glance around had come up short for a curly-haired Slytherin, and pulled out a heavy volume, some parchment, a quill and some ink. He tried not to think that he might be stood up, as his eyes flickered up to the clock on the wall. It was already five minutes past the time they had discreetly agreed to meet.

"You're not actually studying, are you?"

Remus almost jumped out of his skin, swirling around on his chair to meet the stormy gray eyes of Regulus Black. Despite his unpunctual entrance and words of dis-encouragement Remus felt a happy smile jump on to his face.

"I do have NEWTS next year." He breathed, cursing himself for the husky tone. Regulus just rolled his eyes, plunking himself down on the chair opposite the werewolf and pulling the book Remus had been planning to study from towards him.

"Doxy Allergies, Dragonpox and Dinglehoppers – a Comprehensive Guide to Dangerous Diseases." He read, "Sounds fascinating."

Remus picked up on the sarcasm in his tone but decided to let it slide – magical maladies were not for everyone after all. He shrugged his shoulders before replying.

"If I want to get on to the Trainee Healer Program at St. Mungo's then I have to score an Outstanding in Potions, Herbology and Alchemy; Exceeds Expectations in Transfiguration and Charms; and an Outstanding on my HEAT."

Regulus sat forward, making a bridge with his fingers and resting his head on it as he studied Remus.

"What's a heat?"

Remus pulled his book back towards him and flipped it to the right page.

"Healer Apprentice Extension Test." He answered. "Anyone who wants to be a Healer needs to ace it – and you only get two attempts, one at the end of sixth year and one at the end of seventh so..." He motioned towards his book, raising his eyebrows at Regulus to show he really did have to study. Regulus sat back, breathing out a puff of air.

"So why do you want to be a healer?" He asked. Remus glanced up from the text to catch eye-contact. Regulus was dressed in a deep purple shirt and gray suit trousers, he didn't have a bag or any study materials with him. Remus noticed, for the first time since the Slytherin had arrived, that he had a small silver chain around his neck and his hair was freshly washed so his curls looked soft and fluffy. It looked like Regulus had fussed over his appearance just as Remus had, and the werewolf wondered again if their study session was supposed to be a date. He wanted to tell Regulus how his motivation for wanting to be a healer came down to his own want to be healed – how he would always be looking for a cure for his lycanthropy – the most dangerous disease he knew of – but decided against it.

"It just interests me." He replied instead. "It doesn't matter anyway because I'm never going to get an Outstanding in Potions."

Regulus hummed quietly in his throat, neither agreeing nor disagreeing with the older boy. He traced a finger on the wood of the table and sighed.

"So to Merlin with it then." He muttered, making Remus look up once more from where his eyes were not-really-following the page of his book. "I'm bored."

Remus took in the boy once more; carefully planned appearance, lack of study material, a bored pout dancing around his lips, and decided their meeting was definitely not just an excuse to study. He would worry about whether it was a date later, but for now he could at least show the young Slytherin that he wasn't all work and no play.

"Okay." He said, putting his things back in his bag. "Let's go steal some food from the kitchens."

Regulus' eyes lit up in a way that had Remus' stomach doing back-flips, and they quickly excused themselves from the stuffy confines of the library and made their way down to the kitchens. Remus tickled the pear on the tapestry and the two watched as the entrance to the kitchens was revealed.

"How did you find out about that?" Regulus asked quietly as they pushed forwards into the room. As soon as they emerged the other side they were surrounded by a dozen attentive house-elves, all in identical tea-towel-togas, which saved Remus from having to answer and explain about the invisibility-cloak, the map and his friends' animagus forms.

"What can we get for you sirs?" Asked a particularly little elf with nut-brown skin. She bowed low to them with a big grin, and Regulus knelt down so he was at her level when he spoke to her softly.

"Please might we have some water, and to intrude on your kitchen for a bit?" He asked, and when she nodded happily and set off to get a jug of water for them he smiled and called a 'thank you' after her. Remus smirked at the Slytherin.

"You're not what I expected." The werewolf confessed, settling down on the floor as the water was brought to them. Regulus sat down with him, thanking the elf once again, and wrapped his arms around his knees and pulled them up to his chin; suddenly shy.

"What did you expect?" He asked, voice quiet. Remus thought for a long moment about the politest way to word what he wanted to say, pouring them both a cup of water, and then shrugged.

"I'm not sure – Sirius has always been a little, well, rude to the house-elves here." He explained. "I always thought it was due to his... up-bringing."

Regulus rolled his eyes.

"Sirius is rude to our house-elf at home too, because of Kreacher's loyalty to our mum and dad,

but..." He sighed, and Remus noted a small blush had sprung up over his cheeks and ears. "Kreacher was my only friend for a long time."

Remus assumed Kreacher was Regulus' house-elf at home, and smiled at the confession. He adored Sirius, but it had always grated him how the boy had treated house-elves. It might have been due to him also being classed as a creature and not a wizard by the ministry, but he had always felt the way Sirius treated house-elves was as if they were not on the same class as him, and it rubbed Remus up the wrong way. It was nice to see Regulus didn't share in the same habits.

"So," He began, licking his lips lightly. "You said you might try out for the Slytherin Quidditch team?" He asked, remembering the conversation the boy had had with his brother on the train. Regulus nodded earnestly.

"As a Beater." He replied. Remus tried to not be so judgmental, but he couldn't help a brief glance down at the younger Black's physique – which looked small and fragile and not exactly typical Beater quality. Regulus must have seen his curious looks, because he flushed again, but pinned Remus with a look of rosy determination. "I beat up Sirius last year." He stated.

Remus remembered the incident well – he hadn't been there to see it, with it happening on a full-moon, but James had told Remus about it later. How Sirius had looked like he'd been run over by a bulldozer and Regulus had come away with a busted lip and nothing else. Apparently they had all underestimated the kid's strength; or alternatively Sirius' lack-there-of, but Sirius was a beater for the Gryffindor team, so perhaps Regulus would make a good one for the Slytherin one.

"I'll have to keep an eye on you." Remus teased. "James just got made Quidditch Captain, so you can bet Gryffindor will have a top-notch team this year."

Regulus smirked.

"If he can surface from sucking face with Severus for long enough to find the pitch."

Remus laughed at the teasing tone, but inwardly wondered if he could do his own sabotage by keeping Regulus preoccupied as well. He poured himself another glass of water and wondered again whether he should confirm if this was a date or not. Just when he thought he had the courage to ask, the little house-elf came up to ask if they had all they needed and Regulus switched his attention back to her.

He would just have to see how it panned out.

-X-

James felt incredibly self-conscious walking down to Hogsmeade with Severus. It wasn't that he was ashamed to be with the boy, but he had spent a good four years tormenting the Slytherin and he was worried about the backlash that openly dating the boy might bring. Furthermore, Severus seemed even more conscious of how public they were than he was. James had thought they might hold hands, but Severus had snatched his away and put it in his pocket, walking stiffly next to the Gryffindor with enough space between them for another person to fit comfortably.

The only hint that they were on a date was that they'd both put some effort into their looks. James had tamed his hair with some Sneezezy and opted for wearing a forest green jumper as a sort of peace offering to the Slytherin. Severus had tied his hair back with the snake hair-band James had got him for Christmas, which was beginning to get frayed at the edges from overuse, and had adorned a nicely fitting black jacket that James had once told him he liked.

From the outside looking in, however, there was nothing to suggest they were even friendly with each other. The Gryffindor ran a hand through his hair self-consciously, but froze up when he noticed Severus glaring at him.

"S-sorry." He stuttered, wondering what his punishment might be for forgetting how much Severus disliked the habit. The Slytherin sighed.

"No need to apologize." He mumbled in return, then he took his hand out of his pocket and offered it to the Chaser. James took it gratefully, reminding himself that he no longer needed to be so cautious around the taller boy; he and Severus were no longer bound together by a deal – Severus has asked him on a date; they were on equal footing. James gulped. The realization should have been liberating, and it was to some extent, but it also made him a little sad that they were no longer connected by a secret only they shared.

They passed by a group of Ravenclaw girls that James recognized from his Charms class last year, and as they passed the girls pointed their way and started whispering furiously to each other. James felt his ears heat up at the stares and whispers, but Severus held steadfastly on to his fingers, entwining them together with his as he lead them through the village – past The Three Broomsticks, past Honeydukes, past Zonkos' and past Madam Puddifoot's (where James spotted Sirius and Lily sat snuggled in one of the booths) until they were out the other side. Most Hogwarts students had branched off to visit other places and thus not come this far, and James was glad of the privacy. Severus pulled a small basket out of his pocket, which looked like it belonged in a doll's house, and waved his wand at it until it grew into a full sized wicker basket.

"I asked the house elves that stock my kitchen to prepare us a picnic for today in an attempt to be..." The Slytherin trailed off, pale skin flushing. James grinned cheekily.

"Romantic, Sev?"

The Slytherin glared, but nodded nonetheless.

"They went a bit overboard." He warned, and James peered into the basket to see a vast collection of sandwiches, cakes, sausage rolls, scotch eggs, muffins, wraps and skewers. It was enough to feed a family of five and his stomach did a back-flip just looking at it. He hoped Severus wouldn't want him to eat too much. Although he had come a long way since he first contracted Cinis, he was by no means out of the woods, and still needed extra support when it came to eating a regular amount.

"It all looks lovely." He replied, settling down on the blanket Severus had fluffed out. It really did feel romantic, almost cheesy in a way, and once again James was glad of the privacy. Severus sat down next to him, and the two boys fell into an awkward silence whilst they plated up food. It continued on for a long moment even after. James was just steeling his courage to say something, anything; even just 'how did you sleep back in your workroom?', when the Ravenclaw girls from before made an appearance.

"Are you two on friends now?" asked the first girl, a tall girl with long brown hair. James opened his mouth to reply, or tell them to move along, when her friend interrupted him.

"Why would James Potter willingly be around Snape?" She asked, making James snap his mouth closed. "What's he blackmailing you with then?"

The girls all laughed, but James didn't think it funny. They looked at the Gryffindor expectantly, but he just shook his head.

"You're sort of interrupting our date." He told them, sounding much more confident than he felt. The Ravensclaws' stopped, surveying the scene; the picnic, the boys dressed up nicely, and then one of them let out a shriek of laughter that went right through James.

"A date? You're dating? Since when did you become a faggot? Not only that but for greasy Snivellus?"

James bowed his head at the name-calling. He had been the one to make that name a synonym for Severus, but now when he heard it he only felt ashamed. He stood, hoping that it might intimidate the girls into leaving, and noticed that Severus had done the same.

"Leave now." The Slytherin said, his fists shaking at his sides. The girls spared him a glance, but continued to cackle.

"Wait until everyone hears about this, do your friends know James? That their fearless leader is fucking the dungeon bat?" Howled the girl with the long brown hair. James felt himself heating up at the words, a curl of anger flicking inside of him. He had become accustomed to the mood swings of Cinis, but every now and then the anger would catch him off guard and he would lash out. Instinctively he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the group. The girl glanced at it and then a cruel smirk formed on her lips. "Is that why Pettigrew left? He couldn't stand being in the same room as you two going at it?"

James saw red at the mention of his former friend, and raised his wand, twirling it in the right way to amplify the magical effect and a curse on the tip of his tongue, when Severus pushed his wand down.

"Put your wand away." He said, voice low but firm.

James ripped himself away, turning around him and raising his wand again.

"I am ordering you to put your wand away."

James felt a chill go through his spine at the words and almost instantly dropped his wand. It bounced on the grass and let out a few sparks which made the girls back up a few paces. One of the girls sneered at James' instant obedience but they were already making their way back into the village to spread the gossip they had learned. James slowly turned to Severus, who was glaring into space.

He didn't know what to say, Severus had said no more orders, but at the first sign of trouble he had fallen back into old habits. And James had obeyed.

Date

Rumours have a habit of flying faster than a Golden Snitch.

James and Severus quickly packed away their picnic after their run-in with the Ravensclaws, and although James had mumbled that he wanted to return to the castle, Severus didn't pick up on the hint that he was unhappy, and told the Gryffindor he would run some errands and meet up with him later back at Hogwarts. James left feeling upset, and although the boys had cut their date short, by the time James arrived back at the castle the news of his relationship with Severus was being whispered from student to student in the hallways.

The Quidditch Captain was stopped on three separate occasions on his moody ascent to Gryffindor Tower. The first time was by a group of fifth year Hufflepuffs who congratulated him on transcending stereotypes. The second time it was a couple of Slytherins from his year who jeered and made gagging noises at him as they tried to corner him in the corridor. James produced his wand and the threat moved on quickly. The last, and most mortifying, had been when Aidan Hargreaves, the seventh year Beater on the Gryffindor team, who had muscles the size of Quaffles and had always been somewhat of an idol for James, cornered him just outside the fat lady's portrait.

"You really batting for the other team Potter?" He asked, raising one eyebrow at the Chaser. James suddenly realised that he had beaten Aidan out for Quidditch Captain, despite being a year younger and that the Beater was probably more than capable of breaking every bone in his body without the use of a wand if he wanted to. He gulped, stopping in his tracks, and just stared at his team-mate, unsure of the safest answer. Aidan simply smirked. "Dude, I'm not going to judge you for sucking dick man, but Snivellus? I thought you two were like mortal enemies or something..." He explained.

James flushed with shame upon hearing the unsavoury nickname once again. His stomach was doing back-flips, trying to think of a logical way to explain how he and Severus had become close. He had known that a date in Hogsmeade would mean their relationship, which had previously consisted of groping each-other in dark corners and a few wild nights of mind-numbingly good sex in hotels and private places would become public knowledge. But he hadn't put much thought in to what that would actually mean.

Everyone knew. They might not have known the ins and outs of their intimacy, but they would assume that they were intimate, and everything that meant. Everyone would know James had slept with Severus, multiple times, and that every one of those times he'd been begging for it. He coloured at the idea, staring down Aidan Hargreaves, that the Beater might be able to imagine him getting fucked into... well, whatever surface was available, by Snape. Aidan would surely make the assumption that James was the one getting his ass pounded because he'd been there at Quidditch try-outs the year before when Severus had ordered James to spend the day in a dress.

"We, uh..." He spluttered nervously. Aidan smirked, stepping forwards so he was suddenly very

much in James' personal space. The Chaser took another look at the Beater's muscles, wondering how much it would hurt to get punched by the seventh year

"Checking me out Potter?" The Beater smirked, and James realised Aidan was a good five inches taller than him, because he had to lean down to get in James' face. James gulped audibly, making Aidan chuckle. "Damn, you really are kinda girly huh?"

James stepped backwards, suddenly incensed, a familiar flick of anger running around the base of his stomach. He glared at the older boy. Although a big part of him was telling him to be afraid - he pushed it down; he had never been afraid of Aidan before and there was no reason to start. He was about to protest the comment and try and assert some masculinity when Aidan's hand sneaked around his waist and took a firm hold of his behind.

James' mouth fell open in shock, and his stomach seemed to drop, leaving its contents where they were, making him feel queasy. Within two seconds his hands were on Aidan's chest and he was pushing the older boy firmly away.

"What the fuck?" He protested. Aidan, for his part, didn't seem concerned at James' reaction. He laughed.

"I don't generally go for boys, but you would look damn pretty all hot and bothered, wouldn't you? I could do with a tight little ass to fuck." He responded, stepping back into the Chaser's personal space, placing two hands on his hips and leaning down so he was breathing over James' ear. James felt dirty where Aidan was touching him, and sick at the filthy words coming from his mouth. He realised Aidan had very little care about what James was up to with Snape; he was generally more concerned about what James might do with him. "If you'll do it with Snape you'd probably do it with anyone, huh slut?"

"Get off me." The Chaser protested, struggling in the seventh year's grip. Aidan held on tighter to James' hips, and James noted it was hurting him. He tried to stave off the panic he was feeling, but Aidan was stronger than him at the best of times and Cinis sapped most of his strength. He wasn't sure he would be able to fight him if the older teen continued to push. "Stop!" He shouted, hating himself for how terrified it sounded. He knew now why Remus had kept his sexuality a secret for so long – if this was the kind of treatment you got from guys if they thought you were fair game. He opened his mouth once more to shout, or possibly scream, for help, but it was instantly invaded by a foreign tongue. His protests went muffled, and he went to bite down on the Beater's slimy muscle when his attacker was ripped away.

James took a second to assess that he was physically okay, and then looked around to see Hargreaves pinned to the wall by Remus Lupin. The werewolf was seething, anger literally flaring from him, and James thought in that moment Remus might do something drastic, but he was stopped by a manicured hand gently placed on his shoulder.

"See to Potter." The curly haired boy said, although his words seemed far away to James, who seemed to be seeing and hearing everything as if he was under water. After a moments thought he realised the curly haired boy was Regulus; Sirius' little brother, but he wasn't sure what Remus and Regulus would be doing together.

Remus released his hold on Aidan after a moment longer and the Beater spluttered, coughing. James realised his werewolf friend must have pinned the older boy by his throat, and had a moment of panic at the idea, and then Remus was in front of him and James could see Aidan disappearing down the corridor over his shoulder.

"James – James! Are you okay?" Remus was saying, and finally he came back into focus. James

took a deep breath.

"He... was he going to... Oh Merlin. He was going to... Oh my-" James hiccuped back a sob, embarrassingly wiping his eyes in his panic, although no tears had actually fallen. Remus placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder and made soft shushing noises until he calmed down. Regulus hung back awkwardly.

"It's okay now. We scared him off and you can report him to a professor." The werewolf assured. James stepped backwards in alarm.

"A professor? Do I have to report him? I'm not sure I..."

Regulus stepped forward and cleared his throat in an authoritative way which made James feel much calmer than any cooing would. He felt a warmth grow in him and he was flooded with memories of Severus' deep commanding tone. There was something incredibly relieving about giving up control to someone else and just carrying out an order.

"It's your decision on whether to report what just happened. But know that you have support no matter what you decide." The younger Black said, sending Remus a look that told the werewolf to agree or stay quiet. Remus nodded slowly, and James could tell he was fighting the urge to reach out and pull him into a hug. He felt hot in the places Aidan had grabbed him and wanted nothing more than a cleansing shower to start off with. He bit his lip.

"I didn't... I didn't lead him on." He told them, voice small. Remus shook his head.

"We know you didn't mate. I heard you telling him to stop from around the corner." He replied. "I wish I had come sooner."

James shrugged like it was no big deal, although his heart beating fast and loud in his chest told him it was.

"I need a shower." He mumbled, but even as he said it he didn't want to go to the stalls in the Gryffindor dorms. What if he ran into another guy who wanted to harass him, and this time he was naked? Remus seemed to know what his worry was, because he said;

"Okay, you can use the prefects' bathroom – I'll wait for you outside."

-X-

Remus stood outside the prefects' bathroom with Regulus by his side. The castle was still relatively empty; with most of its inhabitants in Hogsmeade, and the two boys were stood in silence; mulling over what they had witnessed.

Remus was still inwardly seething at Hargreaves, and a tiny bit at himself. He'd heard the rumours about Hargreaves; the gay community at Hogwarts was a fairly close knit bunch and they generally looked out for each other no matter what stage of coming out you might be. They had all kept Remus' own sexuality a secret for him at his request and never once pressured him to embrace the pleasures of being outwardly gay. Hargreaves dipped in and out of the community, and was somewhat here, there and everywhere with his sexuality. One minute he's gay but in the closet, the next he's straight as a ruler and it all added up to frustration, which often led to confused outbursts. Remus berated himself for not seeing that those outbursts would turn into something more sinister and violent.

He'd panicked when he'd seen James being taken advantage of and instantly turned into werewolf mode – using his strength to rip Hargreaves away from his friend. He would do it again, but he did

worry about what Regulus must have been thinking. He glanced at the stormy-eyed boy now, who was perusing his nails with a bored expression. The Gryffindor clicked his tongue.

"Thanks for... you know, helping back there." He eventually said. Regulus looked up from his nails to level Remus with a look that was much older than his years.

"Potter would have done the same for me – in fact, he has done the same for me."

Remus felt his blood boil at the insinuation.

"Someone tried to force you to -"

"No, no... not like that. But I've been in plenty a situation where boys with big muscles and tiny brains try to beat me up or something, and Potter has stepped in." Regulus replied, putting Remus' mind at ease somewhat. He still didn't like the idea of Regulus being hurt but at least he hadn't been sexually assaulted.

"Poor James." He mumbled, mainly to himself. Regulus nodded along anyway.

"I can't imagine..." He trailed off. "Where was Severus anyway? I thought you said they were on a date today."

Remus nodded to confirm.

"Something must have happened." He responded. "I guess both our dates ended badly."

A lump caught in Remus' throat as he realised what he had just said, and his eyes widened until he faintly resembled a deer caught in headlights, staring down the young Slytherin for a reaction. Regulus stared back at him, stormy grey eyes swimming with an untold humour.

"Who says our date is over?" He eventually replied. Remus breathed a sigh of relief when Regulus didn't instantly yell and storm off, and then, realising what the Slytherin had actually said, burst into an uncontrollable grin. He tried to squish it down so as not to seem too eager.

"So this was a date then?" He confirmed, and Regulus shrugged as if he couldn't really care if it was a date or not. Remus bit his lip. "If the dates not over how can I make it better?"

Regulus smirked in a way that was not dissimilar to his brother, which made Remus' breath catch in his throat.

"Once we've got Potter somewhere he's comfortable I imagine people will be coming back from Hogsmeade. Assuming you don't want any rumours about us getting back to Sirius I would suggest we call it a day before then." He explained. "I should probably make a move now..."

Remus frowned.

"That doesn't give me a chance to make you remember our date fondly." He replied. The Slytherin stepped closer to him.

"Well, I can think of one thing you could do that might make remember it more fondly." He said, and Remus noticed he was close enough that Remus could wrap his arms around the boy and kiss him if he wanted to.

So he did.

He didn't think about it, he just leant forward, wrapped his arms around the younger boy's waist

and placed his lips on the Black heir's. Judging by Regulus response; to kiss back with gusto, Remus thought his impulse had been correct.

They broke apart for air, and Remus just had time to grin before they were kissing again. This time Regulus wound a hand into Remus' hair, pulling him ever closer so it felt like every inch of their bodies needed to touch. Remus couldn't help himself, he moaned into the younger boy's lips and possessively wrapped himself around the Slytherin. He felt like he could just kiss Regulus forever – that if time had stopped at that moment he would be contented. His crush of almost a year was responding to his affections and he was all curly hair, and pouty lips, and pale skin, and oh Merlin there was the cutest little freckle just below his right ear that just demanded to be kissed – so he did.

Regulus gasped at the contact, balling a fist around Remus' school shirt that Remus suddenly felt stupid for wearing to their first date. But then it was over just as quickly as it had began, because there was a cough from the direction of the prefects bathroom door.

James stood in the door way looking awkward as the two boys sprung apart. Remus had the decency to look sheepish, Regulus just looked amused.

"I would not let Sirius see you two doing that." Said James, looking anywhere but at the couple. Remus panicked.

"Shit, Prongs... please don't tell him."

James briefly glanced between the two boys he'd just caught making out. He shrugged.

"I wont..." He sighed. "Do me a favour though?"

Remus eagerly nodded.

"Anything." He mumbled.

James bit his lip, shuffling awkwardly.

"Please don't tell anyone about what happened with Aidan." He requested. "I'll... I'll sort it."

Remus didn't feel entirely happy with whatever "I'll sort it" meant, but he glanced at Regulus, who nodded and excused himself, and found himself agreeing with James' request.

Evidence

James padded down to the dungeons later that day, having scrubbed and scoured away the feeling of dirt that had clung to him since his run in with Hargreaves. He by-passed the potions classroom and let his feet take him through the potions cabinet and down the dark, familiar corridor that lead to Severus' private quarters.

In the time since Severus had moved to the space permanently he had decorated sparsely and kept the place neat and tidy, but when James entered the comforting four walls for the first time that school year, he noticed that Severus had placed some personal affects about the place to make it seem more homely. He smiled warmly at a framed picture of Severus and himself that his parents had snapped over the summer, hanging on the wall. In the picture James was grinning at Snape, who was smirking back at him in what some people might have thought was mischief, but what James knew was Severus' version of affection.

Severus was pacing.

James had learnt quickly over the past year of companionship that a pacing Severus generally meant bad news for him. He'd interrupted Severus pacing on countless occasions only to be ordered into sadistic, compromising positions. This time, however, Severus stopped the moment he realised James was standing there, and crossed the room, standing awkwardly in front of the Gryffindor.

James didn't dare speak unless he bring on Severus' anger, so he was pleasantly surprised when the Slytherin took his hand gently and folded it into his palm.

"It occurs to me that you left our outing feeling less than satisfied." He said, voice deep and all-encompassing. James felt his knees go weak and inwardly berated himself for the reaction. He shrugged in response. Severus ran his long fingers through James' freshly washed hair. "I apologise for my -"

What Severus had been about to apologise for James would never know, for at that moment the Gryffindor decided he didn't want to know. He didn't want to hear Severus apologising. He pressed forward and pressed his lips to the Slytherin, who instantly went slack in shock before beginning to gently kiss back. When they broke apart James closed his eyes, stomach twisting painfully in anticipation.

"Give me an order." He breathed; pleaded. His hands were still entangled in Severus', and he heard the Slytherin take a sharp intake of breath.

"Why do you want me to do that?" Severus asked, his voice still impossibly deep in a way that made James feel like he could just fall into it forever. James studied his shoelaces in the pretence of interest, resolutely refusing to look up and meet his partners' eyes. He rolled his shoulders like he didn't really have a reason, but he knew he was looking for an escape from what had happened to him earlier that day. Severus must have realised there was more going on than just one of James' whims because he took three steps back, letting go of the shorter boy, and surveyed him with cold eyes.

"Please Sev-" James choked out, folding his arms over his stomach self-consciously, looking anywhere but at the Slytherin. Severus' brow was creased in worry, but eventually, after what seemed like an eternity to James, he nodded.

"Strip." He ordered, and the one word sent a wave of contentment washing over James.

He obediently began unwrapping himself from the layers of clothing he was adorned in, and as his skin was revealed Severus stepped forward once more, pressing feather light kisses to the skin presented to him. James whimpered gently at the attention, eyes slipping closed and mouth hanging slightly open. He could practically feel Severus' self-satisfied smirk pressed against the skin on his shoulder. He dropped his trousers and underwear, arching up like a cat when Severus' long fingers travelled down over his sides. The Slytherin dipped his head to suck one pink nipple into his mouth, making James let out an embarrassingly high keen, resting his hands delicately on the lanky haired boys' shoulders as he continued to work his way down James' chest with sucks and kisses.

"Merlin, Sev..." He mumbled, focusing on the boys wet tongue swirling downwards towards his hipbones. He gasped as he was lifted into the air and placed onto the old sofa. James thought fondly of the first time they had had sex on the sofa. Since then James had been treated to sex on every surface in the workroom and many more aside, yet still it felt like the first time every time Severus pushed his way inside him.

Severus sat backwards, unbuttoning his shirt as he went, but he stilled, eyes focused on James' hipbones. The Gryffindor followed his line of vision, and noticed with a panic that his run in with Aidan earlier that day had left fingerprint bruises on his hips.

His stomach clenched painfully at the sight, making him feel sick.

"Who did that to you?" Severus asked, voice low and dangerous. James suddenly didn't want to be naked any longer. He tried to move his arms so the marks were covered up, but found them pinned above his head by his Slytherin, who's nostrils were flaring angrily. James squirmed.

"I just got into a fight -" He protested, but Severus slammed his hands down against the sofa roughly in an outburst of anger.

"You don't get marks like those from a fight." He replied, voice getting louder. "Who touched you?"

James struggled some more, although he felt safer pinned to the sofa, completely naked, by Severus, than he did when he was pinned by Hargreaves. He sighed, biting his lip. He hadn't wanted to think about it, or talk about it, but he knew Severus would not let it go. He looked up at the Slytherin above him. He was angry, but James could tell that anger wasn't really directed at him.

"Aidan Hargreaves." He found himself telling the boy. Severus frowned in concentration at the confession. James sighed. "I told him to stop, and he didn't. But... he didn't get very far – he just shook me up a bit."

Severus' eyes grew colder and colder at the explanation. After, he helped James to his feet and pushed him back into his clothes.

"Severus wait – what are you going to do?" James asked as Severus was buttoning up James' shirt for him. The Slytherin tilted James' chin upwards and placed a chaste kiss to his lips. For a moment James could pretend they were in a normal, loving relationship.

"I'm going to make sure everyone knows not to touch what's mine."

-X-

Remus met up with Lily in the Charms corridor, and they quickly fell into place walking beside each other to start their after dinner prefect rounds. Curfew was not for a long time, but they were on the early shift that night in order to make sure there was still peace in the corridors. Lily was as beautiful as ever, with her red hair falling in long locks down her back, and her evergreen eyes sparkling with humour. Her relationship with Sirius had in no way swayed her from her perfect attendance, excellent grades or extracurriculars – but even so their had been some choice words from some of her friends about falling for 'bad-boy types'.

Remus could relate – Sirius was definitely something to look at. He imagined the boy as he walked, but the more he tried to focus in on the elder Black the imaginary Sirius' hair would turn curlier, his muscular build would turn slighter and his skin would turn paler until he was looking at Regulus instead. He smiled fondly at the memory of earlier that day, when his crush had culminated in a fiery make-out session with the boy.

He felt bad for James and what the boy had been through, but damn he could have murdered him for interrupting that kiss.

"Who are you thinking about?" Asked Lily as they rounded the corner, a smirk on her painted lips not dissimilar to that of her boyfriends. They said couples that were particularly close often picked up each others' mannerisms.

"Huh, what?"

Lily grinned.

"You've been smiling to yourself since dinner." She explained. "My guess is you've finally got a girlfriend."

Remus almost laughed. He was glad Sirius was still keeping his sexuality a secret, even from his girlfriend, as it showed solidarity in keeping his promises. They all knew Lily was way more than a summer fling for Sirius, and Remus found he honestly wouldn't have minded if Lily did find out that his interest in girls was little to none at the best of times.

"Not a girlfriend." He replied ambiguously. Then, as he pondered a moment longer on whether he could call Regulus his boyfriend, he grinned again. "Okay, there is someone."

Lily seemed to physically inflate with anticipation, the way girls do when they're excited for news and gossip. She practically hopped from foot to foot as she begged for more information.

"Oh is she pretty? Is she Gryffindor? Is she in our year? Do I know her?"

Remus shook his head, more in disbelief at her wish to know the ins and outs of his private life than anything else. He shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly, although the excited part in him wanted to tell her all the details.

He wouldn't though – because it would be a really bad idea to tell Sirius' girlfriend that he was seeing his younger brother. For now, he would suffice to tell her the bare minimum.

"He's cute. He's not a Gryffindor. He's not in our year." He replied. Inwardly he added yes you do know him, but decided against telling her that, in case she pushed for more or somehow connected the dots.

The red-head stilled for a moment, before bouncing back into step beside him again.

"Well, he's a lucky guy." She said, although there was a notable edge to her voice that had not been

there a moment before. Remus shot her a disgruntled look, but she wasn't looking at him to see it. He was beginning to worry he had made the wrong move trusting her with his secret.

"Are we okay?" He asked, tone wary. He adjusted his step so they were walking slightly further away from each other. Lily glanced up and caught eye-contact with him. She bit the inside of her cheek thoughtfully and did not immediately respond. When she did, her tone was guarded.

"Does Sirius know you're gay?"

Remus frowned.

"Of course."

Lily's brow furrowed in worry.

"Oh." She said. Remus stepped backwards slightly, trying not to be hurt by her reaction. She must have realised how it looked because all of a sudden she was rushing forward in an attempt to console him. "Oh my gosh Remus I'm not... I couldn't care less if you're gay. I just... well, Sirius flirts with you a lot. And I thought it was just play-flirting but-"

Remus laughed, and the sound echoed down the hallway, stopping Lily in her ramblings.

"You think Sirius has feelings for me?"

Lily suddenly looked very bashful, and it occurred to Remus that despite her good looks and incredible personality, she had every right to feel just as insecure in her relationship as anyone else. The red-head shrugged her shoulders.

"I mean, I never thought he might be gay – but then I never thought you might be gay."

Remus puffed out a breath of air.

"Rest assured Sirius has no interest in me." He replied, tactfully deciding to leave out mentioning the time last school year when they had slept together and it had only been drunkenly on Remus' part. Lily seemed calmed by his words.

"Okay." She replied as they fell into step beside each other once more. "Wait... do you... are you interested in him?" She asked. Remus gulped down saliva before replying. He shot Lily a calculated look, but eventually decided honesty was the best policy.

"Sirius is an incredibly attractive person, and I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about what it would be like." He replied, and he could see Lily stiffening up at his words. He sighed, running a hand through his hair exasperatedly. "But as I have said to Sirius multiple times I have no interest in dating him. He's too... childish."

Lily looked like she was about to protest the maturity level of her boyfriend, and then seemed to think better of it and shrugged her shoulders in agreement.

"So you like a more mature guy huh?"

Remus smirked, thinking once again of Regulus – how in many ways he mirrored his older brother. You could hardly say Remus liked a maturer man when the person he was currently interested in was two years his junior, but Regulus held himself with a confidence and wisdom that went well beyond his years.

"I suppose so." He agreed at last. Lily grinned.

"So does this make you my gay best friend?"

Remus felt his heart swelling at the idea. It was a cliché, but beyond the marauders he didn't have friends. Lily had been an acquaintance, a prefect partner, and as of late Sirius' girlfriend – but she now appointed herself his friend. The word exploded with possibilities – someone to talk to, a female point of view, someone to escape to when James and Sirius' combined antics became too much. He gulped down a happy lump in his throat and nodded.

"If you'd like."

They rounded another corner into an small opening where older students sometimes gathered to practise their charms and spells together. Like any other day there was a circle of witches and wizards with their wands out, but unlike any other day they were all focused on a single pair of students, and they were cheering on a duel.

Lily and Remus rushed forwards into the crowd, where Remus was met with the sight of Severus Snape, wand out and barely a scratch on him, and Aidan Hargreaves standing opposite him, covered in cuts and gashes.

"What happened?" Lily screeched, but Remus felt a odd pang of satisfaction seeing the seventh year Beater in pain. He quenched the feeling in lieu of his prefect duties. He scanned the crowd to find James looking worried on the edge, and as he stepped forward into the fray, so did James.

"Cut it out Sev." James said, and most the crowds eyes flicked to him. James placed a hand on the Slytherin's shoulders, trying to push him away from the fight. Aidan spat blood at them, but Remus deflected it with his wand and it curled into a puff of smoke mid air.

"Getting your slimy boyfriend to fight your fights now Potter? How in Merlin's name did you get Quidditch Captain over me?" Hargreaves mumbled. "You're just a fucking fairy!"

James turned around and it looked like he might have been about to retaliate, but then a student from the crowd interrupted.

"So the rumours are true, you and Snivellus are fucking now?" She called, enticing a small round of giggles from bystanders and a scarlet flush to James' cheeks. Remus turned around, trying to figure out who had yelled out so he could tell them to back off.

"When did you turn into ponce?" Shouted another, staring at James' hands where they were still connected to Severus' chest, trying to encourage him away. Lily began ushering some less curious students back down the corridor.

"Snape must look good naked – why else would Potter let himself get fucked by that?" Shrieked one more. Remus whirled yet again.

"Maybe Potter's always liked a good anal pounding." Replied Hargreaves. "I always did think his eyes were wondering in the locker-room."

"I never put James Potter down as a pillow-biter." Mused a girl from the crowd.

Hargreaves grinned, but it was a cold, calculated grin. Remus thought to jump in before the Beater could say something damaging to James, but he was too late.

"Please, we all knew Potter was a player. He had a different girlfriend every month. Now we know

they were all beards whilst he was whoring it up with half the guys at school."

James finally let go of Severus to turn around and confront the boy.

"That's not true!"

Hargreaves rose an eyebrow, and took out a wad of paper from his pocket. He threw them on the floor where they spread out, revealing photographs of James with various men, some moving and others still, like muggle photos.

Remus couldn't help but look – there was one of James kissing Sirius in the hall the year before due to the a faulty love-potion. The love potion induced James in the photo was pretty into it, Sirius didn't seem to be so much. Another was of James, dressed in Lily's clothes, held in a tight embrace by Remus – he remembered the incident. Those ones Remus could explain, others were not so easily dismissed.

Remus saw pictures of James hugging Freddy Prescott, who was out and proud at Hogwarts, and pictures of James pecking Lucius Malfoy on his lips, or lying encircled around Davey Gudgeon in a tangle of limbs. The last one Remus saw before he ripped his eyes away was one of James in an affectionate hug with Xenophilius Lovegood; a zany Ravenclaw a year above them, their noses touching, looking for all the world like they were about to start sucking face. Remus imagined if that one had been taken with a wizards camera, the two photographic versions of James and Xenophilius probably would be making out.

"What do they say, a pictures worth a thousand words Potter, even a muggle one." Hargreaves grinned. Severus was staring at the assortment of evidence suggesting James really had been with way more than just the one man. The look on his face was not encouraging. Other members of the crowd were craning to get a good look at the photos.

"You had me followed?" James asked, dropping to his knees to scoop up the glossy photographs. Hargreaves shrugged.

"Please Potter, you've made enemies in this school. I merely collected what other students had on you. It only took me this afternoon to get this much – I am sure there are plenty more besides that." He replied. "Oh, and I have copies."

James hugged the photos to his chest, and look up at Severus for help, but the Slytherin stared down at him with a look that mixed horror with disgust, before turning on his heel and leaving. A couple of cruel students yelled after him as he left.

Lily slapped Remus on the shoulder as she by-passed him.

"Nothing to see here!" She yelled. "Move along!"

The crowd dissipated, which left Lily, Remus, James and the photographs. Remus glanced at the multitude of evidence in the Quidditch Captains hands.

"Moony I swear this isn't what it looks like." James spluttered. "You know that. That one of me and you is innocent. The rest are too."

Remus frowned at the odd reaction – okay so James was a bit of a slut, who cared?

Lily frowned too.

"I am sure Remus doesn't care who you've been involved with James." She reassured him, helping

him scoop up the last few pictures. She stopped halfway through handing him a photo, and when Remus looked down he realised why. The picture was moving, and depicted James engaged in a deep lip-locking. The photo-James had been pushed against a wall and was obviously enjoying their activities, hands roaming everywhere on his partners body, and Remus was impressed by the two boys ability to hold their breath, because it appeared neither of them needed to come up for air.

The other boy in the photo was unmistakably Regulus Black.

Explanations and Confessions

James and Remus sat together in the Gryffindor common room by the fire. Sirius had excused himself earlier and taken Lily up with him to their dorm room, so even if one of them had felt tired, neither would have braved going to bed anyway. As it was, they sat in silence, neither one feeling even remotely tired.

Eventually, Remus snapped.

"So, are we going to discuss those photos?" He asked. "You seem to think they all have an innocent explanation behind them so..."

James winced at his tone, but Remus couldn't find it in himself to feel guilty. He'd been spending the last year trying to ignore his crush on Regulus because the boy was too young, and it was wrong to take advantage of Sirius' innocent little brother and who was to say Regulus was even interested in guys anyway: just to see photographic proof that James apparently had no such qualms.

James produced the offending items from his pocket and started leafing through them, laying them down on the coffee table in front of them one by one with his explanation. The first two, his kiss with Sirius and his hug with Remus, needed no excuses; but then he put down a photo depicting him, entangled in limbs, lying on the floor with Davey Gudgeon.

"That must have been taken just as I pulled Davey away from the Willow two years ago. Stupid kid damn near lost an eye, remember? Old Wompy was going to take a swing so I had to sort of tackle-hug him to the ground and out of the way. It looks like we were up to much more than that, but in reality I barely even know the boy." He explained. Remus begrudgingly consented. He remembered the incident now that James had explained it.

Next, James placed the picture of himself with Xenophilius Lovegood on the table. He looked sheepish as he began his explanation.

"Xeno gave me extra help with Astronomy last year, so we often met up in the tower to talk about the homework I'd been set. He's a year younger than us but he's taking advanced classes in like... everything." He scratched at his cheek absently as he said it and Remus wondered whether James knew he was singing the Ravenclaws' praises so much. "Anyway – Xeno is also kind of weird. It looks like he's leaning into kiss me there, but he was actually warning me that there might be Wrackspurts in my ears."

"What the hell is a Wrackspurt?" Remus asked.

"I have literally no idea. Like I said, Xeno is weird."

Remus shrugged, motioning for James to pull out the next photo. James did, placing down a the photo of him and Lucius. The Chaser rolled his eyes as he did so.

"Urgh, this is kind of embarrassing." He mumbled. "Lucius is my cousin, distantly. But his family have all these stupid hang-ups about proper etiquette. I had to attend some stupid function at Malfoy Manor over the summer with my parents and upon leaving it's customary for cousins to give each other a goodbye kiss. That's all that is."

Remus smirked at the disgusted look on James' face. So far he could admit most of the pictures had reasonable explanations, so he was holding out hope that Regulus' did too – except that one really

didn't look like it could have an innocent story behind it.

James went on to explain how his hug with Freddy Prescott was purely platonic and it wasn't his fault the guy dressed in pride flags on the weekends; and that the photo of him snuggled up on the sofa with Stanley Reynolds had been taken at the wrong time, as in actual fact James had only been in that position for a moment before he scooted away. He went on to explain about the particularly awkward photo of himself and Professor Jed (their young, attractive Muggle Studies teacher).

"That can not be innocent." Remus said as it was placed on the table. He mentally added; or legal.

The picture version of James was sat on the desk of their professor, his legs spread apart with Professor Jed standing in-between them. Jed had James arm held in his hands and two of James' fingers in his mouth, which he was sucking on merrily. Picture James at least was blushing. Remus looked up to see real-life James was rosy-cheeked as well. Despite what explanation the Quidditch Captain would give for the photo, Remus could tell that James thought the teacher was attractive.

"I would hate to think Professor Jed might get backlash over this." James mumbled. "I mean, it wasn't exactly professional, but it wasn't sexual."

Remus rose an eyebrow.

"Explain."

"Jed was teaching that class last year about heat conduction and the ways muggles protect themselves against fire and stuff when they don't have heat-repellent potions or charms, remember?" James asked. Remus nodded. He still had some notes about it scribbled down somewhere. James shrugged. "Well after everyone had packed up I had a question about it, because something about it struck a cord with the whole Cinis thing, so I hung back, and as he was putting some equipment away I stumbled forward and tried to catch myself and accidentally put my hand on one of the hot plates. It only got a couple of fingers, but it got them pretty bad and well, Jed's a muggle-born so he sort of acted on instinct and there was no water about so he just placed me on the desk and started sucking on my fingers. Trust me, I freaked out at the time, but the nurse did say his quick thinking did make it easier for her to heal the burn."

Remus breathed a sigh of relief at the explanation, but then James placed the final picture on the table. He and Regulus, heavily making-out. Remus wanted to retreat back into a stony silence, but he knew he had to ask the question.

"How do you explain that one then?"

James sighed, staring at the picture wistfully. He looked up to catch eye contact with his friend.

"I can't." He replied.

Remus frowned.

"What do you mean you can't. If there's an explanation as to why Professor Jed would be sucking on your fingers there's got to be an explanation for that!" He shot back, waving his hand at the photo on the table as he said 'that'. James looked away, a flush creeping up over his ears as he once again looked over the photo. The in-photo version of James seemed to be moaning wantonly as Regulus pushed him further into the wall, hands trailing low and teeth grazing over James' bared neck. Remus' nostrils flared dangerously.

James made a sort of aggravated, embarrassed noise somewhere between a whine and a hiccup.

"That photo was taken over the summer." He mumbled. "Severus and I had got into this big fight and I tried talking to Sirius about it but Sirius just told me he didn't want to hear about my relationship problems – which annoyed me because Severus and I weren't even in a relationship. So I was frustrated and upset and I just decided to floo away so I yelled the first place I could think of and it was The Leaky Cauldron. I didn't expect to run into anyone there because the school's supplies list hadn't been issued yet, but when I got there Regulus was sat at one of the tables with a half empty drink and he looked pretty upset himself, so I just sat down and we got to chatting."

Remus snorted.

"It looks like you got up to more than just chatting."

James huffed, but other than that didn't respond to Remus' comments.

"We chatted, for ages. I was still annoyed at Sirius for his comments and told Reg that I just wanted to do something to annoy him back. Regulus told me he was also pretty annoyed at Sirius, apparently they'd had an argument about their mother, which is always a sore subject, and so Regulus came up with a plan." James ran a hand through his hair exasperatedly, glancing around the common room at the dwindlers, before continuing on. "We booked ourselves into a room, Regulus set up the camera to take photos automatically and we awkwardly started kissing. Except, as I am sure you are aware – Regulus is a damn good kisser."

Remus gulped down a retort, and curtly nodded instead.

"So you got swept away." He guessed. "Did you two...?"

"Merlin no, Moony! He's like fourteen!" James protested, and Remus breathed another sigh of relief. James puffed out an agitated breath. "We just, well we pretty much did what you saw in the photo. Afterwards I lost my nerve and asked Regulus to destroy the photos and not show Sirius – he said he would. I stopped being annoyed with Sirius and made up with Sev and that was the end of it as far as I was concerned. I certainly didn't know that you and Reg were a thing."

James pouted. Remus huffed, crossing his arms.

"I can't be mad. Regulus and I aren't a thing. Today was the first time anything like that's happened."

James rose an eyebrow.

"I was imagining it was Severus the whole time, so you know." He confessed. Remus smirked.

"I think you're going to have to convince him of everything you've told me." He replied. James nodded.

"I know. He's so pissed off right now though it would be useless going to him."

Remus nodded his agreement, before a playful smirk sneaked its way onto his features. He swept up the photos and picked out the one with their muggle studies teacher.

"I think I might keep this one for the bank." He grinned.

James took a second to register what he was saying before:

"Oh Merlin, Remus, that's disgusting!"

-X-

Classes quickly took over the werewolf's life, and between early studying for NEWTS and the extra studying he was doing to prepare to sit his HEAT at the end of the year, Remus had barely been able to think about Regulus. On the rare times he did find himself day-dreaming about ivory skin and stormy eyes he was forcibly reminded of the photo of James and Regulus making out in The Leaky Cauldron. The photo itself was bad enough, the story behind it was a disaster, and then he kept coming back to one question.

If Regulus had had the photo and told James he would get rid of it, how on earth did it end up in Hargreaves' collection?

He couldn't really afford to think about it.

James was valiantly rising above the comments regarding his and Severus' relationship, despite the fact that Severus was still not talking to him. He was also ignoring the other comments regarding the photographs that Hargreaves had shared with the castle. The only time he had seemed even slightly upset with the developments was at their first Quidditch practise of the year. James had called a meeting with the remaining members to explain about how he planned on re-doing try-outs now that Sally had graduated and was no longer in charge. Remus was almost certain it was just an excuse to kick Hargreaves off the team; and he couldn't blame him.

What it all added up to was that the next time Remus was able to see Regulus more than a week had passed.

Remus was in the library, perusing an ancient book about incurable curses, when Regulus slid into the seat beside him and gently placed a hand on the werewolf's knee under the table. Remus instantly jolted, creating a large clang on the table and making the Slytherin grin cheekily. Madame Pince shushed them. Regulus removed his hand.

"Re-Regulus!" The Gryffindor whispered dramatically.

"Hey." Regulus mumbled back. Remus didn't know how he did it, but he managed to ladle that one word with an immeasurable amount of sex-appeal.

"Regulus." Remus repeated, more firmly this time. "You can't be here right now." He added, glancing furtively around the library. Regulus frowned.

"Why?" He asked, scooting a little closer to the Gryffindor. Regulus replaced his hand on Remus' knee. "We've not even seen each other since that first date." He added, leaning in to whisper seductively into Remus' ear.

Remus nodded. He too had been distressed by their lack of communication, and couldn't help but drift into day-dreams about kissing the younger boy. There was just one problem.

"Regulus!"

Regulus ripped himself away faster than a race-car taking off and it would have been funny if it hadn't been terrifying.

"Merlin Sirius, what are you doing in a library?" Regulus asked, scooting his chair further away from Remus. Sirius seemed oblivious to what his brother and friend had been up to, and Remus knew if he even had an inkling then he wouldn't be able to hide his anger, so he figured they were probably in the clear. Regulus, on the other hand, was twitching nervously. Remus couldn't help but think it was cute – the young Slytherin seemed so chilled most of the time, it was nice to see

him actually being affected by something.

Sirius just shrugged.

"Lily wanted to look at like... books or something." He replied, sitting down at their table. Regulus shot Remus a look of pure terror, and Remus would have laughed if the whole situation wasn't worrisome. Sirius kicked his chair back and surveyed his younger brother, tucking his hands behind his head. Remus had seen the look before, and he suddenly had a dreadful feeling in the pit of his stomach. "So, little brother – when are we going to talk about you and Prongs?"

The bottom seemed to fall out of Remus' stomach. Regulus, who had been trying to carefully scoot himself even further away from the werewolf without it looking suspicious, snapped his head round to look at his older brother with an audible click that made Remus wince.

"What... what do you mean?" He asked, voice high with false curiosity. Sirius snorted.

"Don't play dumb with me kid." He replied. "I ran into Aidan Hargreaves in the hall on the way here. He had this really interesting photo to give me..."

Remus' nostrils flared at the name. Regulus immediately burst into a babble of excuses.

"That photo is not what it looks like! It was just a stupid joke, we never did any more than that I swear-"

Sirius held up a hand to silence him. Regulus shot Remus a worried look, and Remus realised that as far as the Slytherin was concerned, Remus didn't know about his summer make-out with James. Sirius turned to Remus with an amused smirk.

"So apparently Jamie-boy's been having a secret-affair with my brother." He told the werewolf. Remus felt he should probably interject that that wasn't really the case, as he could see the silent anger radiating from him.

"Pads – Hargreaves is out to destroy James right now." He explained. "That photo has a... relatively innocent explanation."

Sirius didn't seem calmed by Remus' words, in fact, his anger re-directed to his fellow Gryffindor.

"So you knew about it?" He asked. Remus tried really hard not to shrink back into his seat with the force of his friend's glare. Regulus was staring at Remus as well.

"You... you knew?"

Remus shot the younger Black a wink when he was sure Sirius was seething too much to notice.

"Why would Hargreaves have a photo of that anyway? And why would he be 'out to destroy James' anyway?" Sirius asked when he had managed to calm down a bit. Remus opened his mouth to answer, but Regulus interjected.

"I gave it to him."

There should have been a shocked silence. Remus felt like there should have been a shocked silence. But Sirius still had a hundred more questions.

"Why would you have a photo of that? Why were you snogging James?"

Regulus rolled his eyes.

"If you would just let me explain-" He mumbled, but Remus interrupted this time.

"Why would you give that picture to Hargreaves? He said he got all those photo's that afternoon..." He grumbled. "You saw what he did to James... why would you give him more leverage?"

Regulus may have been about to explain, but Sirius was still angry.

"When is someone going to explain what Hargreaves did to James?" He demanded.

Remus couldn't help it, he snapped back.

"He tried to rape him for fucks sake!"

There it was. There was the shocked silence.

Secrets

Never let it be said that Sirius didn't have priorities. After Remus' outburst, his anger over the photograph of James and Regulus' summer activities evaporated. There was an eerie moment when Sirius seemed to calm down, sit back, and accept the situation – and then he stood from the table and exited the library without a word. By the time Lily had examined the Ancient Runes Section and finally made it to their table, Sirius was long gone.

He made a bee-line for their dormitory and when that turned up empty for their messy-haired Quidditch Captain he grabbed the map and checked it for James' location.

What he saw on the parchment made his blood boil. James was on the Quidditch Pitch – with Aidan Hargreaves. Alone.

He made it to the pitch in a record time of just under five minutes, and arrived panting in front of his dorm-mate and Hargreaves. James seemed shocked by his arrival, but Sirius by-passed him in favour of planting his fist on Hargreaves' nose.

James yelled.

"What in Merlin's name, Sirius?" He asked.

Sirius ignored his question in favour of landing another punch, tackling the older Beater to the ground in an attempt to attack him over and over again. Almost instantly he was overpowered and turned over by Hargreaves, who began punching back – making James give another, incoherent, yell. The two Beaters continued to attack each other until finally James pulled out his wand.

"Aguamenti!" He shouted, and the two brawling teens were doused in a jet of water. The force was enough to knock them away from each other. "Now, Padfoot, are you going to explain why you just attacked a team-member?" He asked, crossing his arms over his chest defensively.

Sirius shot him a look of pure disbelief, wiping a hand over his forehead to dislodge some of the water James had shot at him. His nose was bleeding.

"Anyone who puts his hands on you when you don't want him to isn't a team-member Prongs." He replied.

James took a step backwards. Hargreaves made his way back to them from where he had been shot backwards by the force of James' spell. He spat on the ground at their feet.

"He wanted my hands everywhere I put them and more, the little slut." He growled. Sirius watched as James took another step backwards. He registered the hint of fear in his friend's eyes and instantly wanted to go back to blindly attacking the seventh-year. "You saw the picture Black."

"Oh Merlin's Beard, which one?" James asked back. Sirius made a mental note to ask him about what other photos there were, and then turned his attention back to Hargreaves.

"I suggest you leave." He told the boy. "Now."

Hargreaves looked like he was about to protest, but Sirius produced his wand. He eyed it warily –

he could easily take Sirius in a fist-fight, but his spells could use some work. He spat once more and left the pitch fuming. James rushed to Sirius and used his hands to gently turn the boys' face to him, so he could look at the damage.

"Merlin Pads, he could have really hurt you." He mumbled, examining the cut on his lip and bloody nose. Sirius rolled his eyes.

"He could have hurt you, but apparently you're stupid enough to meet up with him alone." He replied. "Who the fuck puts themselves in that situation?"

James sighed.

"I just wanted to talk to him about what happened. Ask him to stop with those damn photos."

Sirius pushed James' hands away.

"He tried to rape you Jamie." He mumbled, trying to sound gentle, despite the horrible subject matter.

James crossed his arms over his chest defensively.

"He scared me Pads, but he never got passed scaring me." He admitted. "Who even told you about it?"

Sirius rose an eyebrow.

"Remus. Seems like everyone knew." He replied. "Also, how many photos are there, exactly?"

James shrugged, awkwardly kicking the ground so tufts of grass were being dislodged.

"I dunno, he had like... seven or so."

Sirius coughed.

"There are seven or so photos of you snogging my brother?"

James paled considerably. If Sirius hadn't been so mad about the whole situation, he might have found it funny. The Quidditch Captain retreated a few more steps away from Sirius, probably out of fear of being swung at.

"There's only one of those."

"Yeah? That's one too many – but we'll discuss that later." The Beater replied. "For now... no more meeting up with Hargreaves on your own. Even if you think all he'll do is scare you, because he's worse than that. Don't... don't put yourself in harms way."

James shifted awkwardly.

"I won't." He mumbled. "I just wanted him to stop with telling everyone I'm a man-slut. Like... Sev won't even talk to me and it's not even true!"

Sirius frowned slightly at the mention of the Slytherin; even after all this time, he found the idea of James' romance with Severus mildly nauseating.

"That picture with Regulus is pretty slutty to be honest." He replied without thinking. James opened his mouth to protest, flushing up into his ears at his friends words, but Sirius continued talking.

"Like I would literally cast an unforgivable on you if you weren't my best friend."

"There is seriously an explanation about that photo." James tried to protest. Sirius grumbled low in his throat, and gently lowered himself to the floor, lying down on the grass of the Quidditch Pitch. After a moments deliberation James joined him there. Sirius smirked at the sky.

"Does that explanation cover why you would let yourself be dominated by a kid two years younger than you?"

James quickly stood up again, fiddling nervously. Sirius was still upset, but at least he got to see James squirm. There was also a distinct satisfaction in knowing his brother wouldn't let James top.

"Yeah – I need to go see Sev now." The Quidditch Captain spluttered.

Sirius waved after him,.

"Okay, but don't think I'm done being mad at you." He shouted after James' retreating back. "From now on I'm giving you the silent treatment."

-X-

James was nervous by the time he entered the dungeons. He'd tried speaking to Severus various times since the run in with Aidan in the hall over a week before. He had attempted to coerce the Slytherin into discussing everything when he came to collect the Elixir on the Friday, but he had been unsuccessful in convincing him that the pictures he had seen were innocent. He trudged through the OWL potions classroom they had used last year and had a moment of nostalgia. James had just scraped a pass in Potions thanks to Severus' help and had happily given it up the moment he could – but he found himself missing the room.

He had a brief flash-back to the very first time he remembered receiving an elixir from Severus, which had been right there in the OWL Potions classroom, and he smiled in spite of himself. They had come a long way since then. He spared the room a moments contemplation before he padded through the room and down the familiar hallway to Severus' work room, and knocked lightly on the door. There was long moment before it was pulled open by his Slytherin.

Severus looked terrible.

It wasn't exactly anything new, Severus often looked terrible, but in that moment he looked worse to James than he had for a long time. His skin looked paler than it had during the summer, and there were beads of sweat on his neck. His robes were too short for him, his recent growth-spurt had made him look too skinny, and his greasy hair was hanging in lanky curtains over his face, which unfortunately accentuated the nose – that stupidly big, disfigured nose.

James reached upwards and kissed it.

"You look sick." He said. Severus rolled his eyes, but he stepped aside so that James could enter the workroom. As he did, he noticed the photo in it's frame of the two of them had been turned down. He settled himself down on the sofa and turned it back up.

"What are you doing here?" Severus asked, he looked like he wanted to sit as well, but he hovered at the edge instead. James shrugged.

"We need to talk about those photos." He replied. The Slytherin crossed the room and stirred at the cauldrons on the other side. He'd been working relentlessly on Wolfsbane, but he had come up with a lot of barriers in the development and so he had been getting increasingly stressed with it.

"I don't think there's anything to say. I was foolish to believe I was anything special to you. I see now I was one in a long list of self-discoveries." He said, voice low. For once James didn't find it sexy – it was probably due to the complete lack of emotion in Severus' voice.

James stood; he wanted to get closer to Severus, but he had cocooned himself by the potions and James knew if he stood any closer the fumes would start affecting him. It was a strategic move on Severus' part.

"That's not what happened. Those photos just look bad – not a single one doesn't have an explanation behind it." He tried to explain. Severus looked at him out of the side of his eye, but didn't say anything else. James sighed. "You have always been special to me."

Severus slammed his hands into the cauldron and sent the contents flying. James drew his wand at lightning speed and caught the potion in mid air, magically carrying it back to its container and depositing it there. Severus huffed noisily through his nose, probably annoyed that he had almost lost all that work in a fit of anger.

"I have not always been special to you. Or do you make a habit of treating people you feel special as dirt on your shoe for the first four years you know them?"

James bit his lip. He had thought they had moved passed the Marauders past behaviour, but it kept coming back to haunt him. He swallowed down a lump in his throat.

"You're special to me now." He amended. "I haven't been with anyone else."

Severus sneered.

"Those photos -"

"Those photos are misleading!" James snapped.

"Explain them then." Severus snapped back, and James could tell in that moment he was fed up of being angry at James. It seemed he'd only been holding on to his resentment out of habit.

So James explained them, he explained about them being taken at the wrong time, about the awkward stories behind them, and he gingerly explained about the make-out session he had engaged in with Regulus after their fight in the summer holidays. During the explanations Severus migrated back to the sofa and pulled James down with him: he pushed his hands up under James' shirt and splayed out his fingers over his ribs. James' breath hitched, but he valiantly continued talking through the pictures despite it.

"I swear to you," He said, "I'm not interested in anyone else."

Severus hummed gently, raking his fingers down James' sides and nudging his nose into the Gryffindor's neck – when James obediently tilted his chin to give Severus more access, the lanky-haired boy kissed, nibbled and sucked there until James was sighing and keening appreciatively. Severus lowered the boy until his back hit the cushions of the sofa and made quick work of removing his clothes; when James was naked beneath him he stopped to admire the Quidditch Captain. He was half-hard and sensitive to the touch.

He brushed a hand over his hips – the finger bruises that had been there a week ago had paled to the point where they wouldn't be noticeable if you didn't know they were there. Severus pushed his own fingers over the marks until James sucked in an unimpressed breath.

"What the hell Sev?" He asked.

Severus declined to answer, instead dipping his head to James' crotch, sucking his cock into his mouth and working the boy to a full erection. James moaned at the feeling, fisting a hand into Severus' hair and pulling it back off his face so it didn't get caught up in the saliva on his dick – it was slimy to touch, but Severus' mouth was more than making up for the slight inconvenience. It was a rare treat, to be pleased by Severus like this. Sure, he'd been pleased by him plenty of times, in hard poundings and torturous arse-lickings, but when it came to blow-jobs it was mainly James on his knees. Severus was making up in kind for the lack of doing it before, sucking and licking and swallowing him down. James held valiantly on to the boy's hair, trying to keep his hips still and panting shallowly, trying not to focus on the Slytherin's hands, which were steadily pushing up his sides, twisting at his nipples, or playfully skimming over his sensitive hips and ribs. The only sounds in the room were James' uncontrollable huffs and pants, and the wet, sucking sound of Severus' mouth on his dick.

It was maddening.

Then Severus extracted himself with a loud, wet, suck and grumbled low in his throat, putting pressure on the finger-mark bruises again so that James had to suck in a deep breath to stop from crying out.

"Mine." The Slytherin said, and James could do nothing but nod along dumbly, repeatedly whispering 'yes'.

"Yes, yes, yes..." He whimpered, as Severus' fingers travelled low, cupping his balls in his hand and rolling them gently. "Yes, yes... Merlin, yes!" He continued as they went even lower, fingering delicately at his hole. He keened off the bed and even though he couldn't see it he knew that Severus would be giving him that devilishly evil smirk.

"What are you, James?" Severus asked, his fingers magically slicked in lubricant and pushing inside his lover. James spread his legs a little further, feeling like the slut he'd been accused of but not even caring because it was for Severus, so it was okay.

"Yours." He responded.

He meant it. He meant every single possibility the one syllable word could represent. He was Severus' - in body, mind and soul. He logically wanted to be the boy's equal - but he couldn't deny he missed being the Slytherin's slave. To be Severus' in a way nobody else could be, and that he couldn't be for any one else. He was Severus' to do with as he pleased, and he trusted the man, beyond anyone else, to treat James' trust, and his obedience, with what it was due. To treat it with love.

Severus fingered him ruthlessly, preparing him quickly, and his cock was buried in James quicker than the Gryffindor would have expected. Usually Severus would draw this part out, make James squirm and beg before he would finally be rewarded with the Slytherin fucking into him. This was desperate, needy – as if Severus had been effected by their short break even more so than James had. He thrust into him in fast snaps, holding his hips in place and fucking down into the soft warmth. James couldn't help it, he began to cry out on every exhale in high-pitched shouts. It was all he could do to keep up with the frantic rhythm and not scream.

He wasn't a screamer. He reminded himself. Even though there had been plenty of times when Severus was pounding into him in the past, when he could feel his release building inside of him, that had made him want to vocalise his need in a long, pure scream. He'd heard it before, in the girls Sirius would sometimes take to bed in their dorm; when he would forget to put silencing charms up. When their pleasure got to much they would scream – scream like they were being murdered by multiple orgasm. James had experienced a large amount of second hand

embarrassment for those girls – surely it was awkward to not be able to control yourself, even just a little bit to stop from actually screaming? But now he could understand it – in a relentless pace like this, when pleasure built so quickly and felt like it might never burst – he could understand the need to scream.

And then Severus changed his angle ever so slightly and he did.

He screamed like he had been transported and there was no one around but him and the ever crashing tide of the ocean. He screamed out all his frustration and anger and pain to the blue expanse and let the waves of pleasure and release wash over him, cleaning away all the upset he had been feeling. He vaguely registered Severus slowing down to a stop, and as he came back to the present he could feel the sticky semen of Severus' flowing down between his legs as the Slytherin pulled out of him, and his own come in lines across his stomach. As his mind returned to the workroom so did his embarrassment, and he covered his face to stop Severus from seeing the flush that had sprung up there.

Severus smirked.

"Seemed like you enjoyed that." He commented, making James' cheeks and ears feel even hotter. The Slytherin gently pried his hands away from his face, forcing James to look at him. James said nothing, but it seemed Severus was willing to let the subject drop. "Remember James, that you are mine. I will make sure everyone in the damn castle knows it if I have to."

In the past, James might have felt that a possessive statement such as that would have been a turn-off. Now, it just felt reassuring.

-X-

Remus and Regulus sat in the library long after Sirius had left. Lily had found their table, assessed that Sirius was no longer in the library and, upon realising she could cut the tension in the air with a knife, had wisely decided to leave the two boys still remaining there well enough alone. Regulus was no longer trying to give Remus sneaky footsie games under the table, or in any way attempting to steer Remus towards a more playful get together. For all the world he looked like a lost puppy, with his large grey eyes and poodle curls. He looked down at his lap, and then up at the werewolf through his long lashes. Remus was not fooled into thinking this meant the boy was innocent.

"Explain to me," He said, voice coming out soft, but with a noticeable edge to it, "why you would give Hargreaves that photo."

Regulus looked down at his lap for longer than was probably necessary. He wasn't sure his explanation would give Remus any comfort, and their relationship had only just started. He hated to think of it as over before it had even begun. He wrung his hands together uncomfortably.

"He never explained what he wanted it for – only that he knew I had it." He tried to excuse himself. "He shouldn't even have known, but I had it in my bag at the beginning of term and when I dropped it on my way to lessons it spilled out. Hargreaves helped me pick my things back up – I didn't even realise he'd seen it."

Remus thinned his lips.

"You told Prongs you would destroy it." He mumbled.

"And I meant to." Regulus replied. "I just forgot about it. My summer became more busy than usual and it got put in my school bag to be out of the way and I just... forgot."

Remus almost smiled. He'd come to think of Regulus as the cool, calm and collected version of his older brother – the both of them lived on a whole other plane of existence, and Remus had tended to think of them both as something wholly more than humans – gods, in a sense. It was odd to see Regulus admitting a mistake – proving he was, after all, only human.

"Okay, but you knew what Hargreaves had done to James, why give it to him?"

At this, Regulus sighed. He bit his lip, and despite everything, Remus found it incredibly attractive.

"He also knew something else about me – something I didn't want anyone to know. I felt sorry for James, I truly did, but... this secret is important. It needs to stay secret."

"He's blackmailing you?"

Regulus shrugged. "I gave him what he wanted, that should be the end of it..." He scratched his neck absently. "I... I am sorry."

Remus begged to differ, the type of people that blackmailed rarely stuck to just one instance, but he didn't say it. Regulus was obviously upset about what he'd done and Remus knew what it was like to keep a secret – could he truly say he would have stood up to Hargreaves if the boy had threatened to tell the school about his lycanthropy?

"Keeping secrets suck." He said at last, not yet entirely willing to accept the apology. Sure, Regulus was cute and Remus couldn't deny his infatuation with the younger Black sibling, but James' friendship meant almost everything to Remus – James, Sirius and Peter had accepted him when he thought nobody would – and he was very precious about his friends. "I won't ask you to tell me what it is that Hargreaves has on you, but would you be able to tell me how he knows your secret?"

Regulus looked up at him then, hope in his eyes that had been absent before, and Remus found he had all but forgiven the boy for his indiscretions in his heart, if not completely in his mind. The younger boy bit his lip thoughtfully before responding.

"Our families know each other." He admitted. "He lives close by to us... we were close until recently."

Remus swallowed down a lump in his throat.

"He's an ex." He guessed. Regulus huffed out a laugh.

"No. We were just moving in similar circles." He replied. "I thought I could trust him with my secret. As it turns out, I couldn't."

Remus took a moment to look at the Slytherin. He seemed impossibly older than his fourteen years. He resolved to see if he could get Sirius to forgive James for the photo. If that was possible, then maybe he would think about breeching the subject of he and Regulus dating.

Questions

Sirius was true to his word. When James returned back to the Gryffindor common room, thoroughly spent and possibly limping ever so slightly, Sirius was completely unwilling to even look at him. He and Lily were sat on the sofa by the window, with Remus reading a book in an armchair opposite. There was another seat left, so James collapsed into it. Remus looked up at his sharp intake of breath and smirked, making the Chaser colour slightly.

"I take it you and Snape have made up?" He grinned. Sirius looked up from where he and Lily had been playing a game of Exploding Snap and levelled Remus a curious look.

"He didn't even say anything, how would you know that?" He asked, betraying that he was at least aware of his friend's presence.

Remus' grin only grew, much to James' discomfort.

"He didn't have to say anything." He replied, putting his nose back in his book to assure James he wouldn't be teasing him for long. Sirius spared the messy haired teen a quick glance, mind working overtime to try and figure out what Remus could see that he couldn't, after a moment's more scrutiny he scrunched up his nose in disgust.

"Oh, ew." He said, turning back to the game just in time to shout "Snap!" and have the cards let off a loud bang. Coughing away the cinders, which Lily then neatly swept into the bin by the table, he went back to ignoring the boy completely.

Lily smiled at his discomfort instead, and leant forward so she could speak to James around Sirius.

"I have to admit, I still find it odd that you and Severus are... together." She spoke. "I mean, the two of you really hated each other, and now this year you're openly dating. I mean, did you ever truly hate each other or was that all for show?"

Sirius' ears perked up at the train of thought, and James felt a familiar curl of anger clench low in his stomach. He wasn't really angry at Lily for thinking it, after all, his relationship with Severus was odd – but Cinis was making it difficult to concentrate. He had become used to seeing Sirius and Lily together, but he couldn't deny there were still times when he thought of Lily as his girl – and although he was with Severus, she was still an achingly beautiful woman.

"I think you and Pads are an odd couple too." He responded after a short time. He had been trying to find the words to voice his thoughts without coming across unnaturally angry. Cinis still burned him from the inside, but he was getting better at hiding, if not controlling, the symptoms.

Sirius seemed to bristle at the words, but he wasn't rising to the bait. Nothing was going to make him talk to James at that moment. He was still mad about the photograph. Remus had found him in the common room a bit before and explained the photo through thoroughly, but it didn't change the fact that James and Regulus had been making out – and it was made worse by the fact that Regulus and James had decided to do that as a way of getting back at him.

Lily smiled at her boyfriend's inner turmoil, he was childish at times, but she put up with that for the times when he was kind and wise.

"I guess I just realised that with the bad comes a whole lot of good." She admitted. "But you and Severus had a lot more to overcome."

James nodded in agreement.

"We still have a lot to overcome." He replied. "But... he makes me feel safe." He admitted quietly. He was hyper-aware of how Remus' fingers stilled, no longer rustling the pages of his book, and how Sirius turned to look at him again, this time openly staring. He had never really discussed his relationship with Severus openly before. It was at best private, and at worst something Sirius would wave away in disgust.

He and the Slytherin had been skirting around the subject of their mutual desire for the other the entire summer, and although James had been elated when Severus had thrown caution to the wind and asked him to date, instead of blindly follow orders, he had been a little upset he had no-one to share his happiness with. Even Remus, who was by far the better choice for talking about his budding romance with Severus, had always been a little confused about what James saw in the greasy potions enthusiast. It was the first time he was admitting out-loud what made Severus special to him.

"Safe?" Came the question, stunted and low. James looked at Sirius, who had obviously uttered the query before realising he was supposed to be mad with the Chaser. He nodded back. Sirius crossed his arms. "I am sure there are lots of people that can make you feel safe." He added. James had known it was coming, but it still made the curl of anger in his stomach flick upwards.

"Not like him." He replied, coolly.

Sirius rolled his eyes, Lily looked like she was about to tell him to drop it, when Remus leapt in instead.

"Safe is an odd word to choose Prongs." He interjected. Sirius nodded along, waving at Remus like two were sharing a common thought – it occurred to James that they may very well have been. Remus carried on. "I mean, if he made you feel happy, or loved or even just ridiculously turned on, that's one thing... but safe means..."

James stood before he knew what he was doing.

"Safe means what, Moony?" He asked, voice rising with the flick of the flames inside him. "Him making me feel safe is important. It means I don't have to spend the rest of my life worrying! It means I can rely on him to help me through when I'm puking up my dinner, or passing out, or when I can't deal with the world and I just need someone to tell me what to do. It means I've got someone in my corner when I'm irrationally angry, who can calm me down. It means I can trust him not to hurt me when I show up at his door weak and depressed. It means I can go week to week with someone who actually understands what I'm going through, who can make the one potion in the world that can keep me from dying!"

He balled his hands in to fists and then unclenched them again, pressed his palms into his eyes, annoyed at himself for getting so worked up. He wasn't crying, as such, but he could feel the water welling up there and was trying desperately to push the tears back in so they wouldn't fall. Remus stood as well, putting a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"You're right James – feeling safe is important. But... all those things, they're all about Cinis." He responded, gently this time, like he was talking to a frightened child. "You've learnt to trust Snape because you were forced into a situation where you had to... all I'm asking is, would you still be with him if he didn't make you feel safe?"

James shrugged his shoulder away from the werewolf's grasp. He wouldn't have been able to do it if Remus' didn't let him – the boy was stronger than him even without his enhanced werewolf

strength, but Remus let go without a fight.

"I wouldn't be with anyone if they didn't make me feel safe." He muttered stubbornly. Remus gave a sort of half smile, half grimace.

"But love isn't safe." He replied. "It's terrifying. It's like jumping off a cliff. You have to have faith that the person you love won't leave but you're never safe in the knowledge. Just think about it – if Snape wasn't literally keeping you alive – would you still want to be around him?"

James closed his eyes. He knew that it sounded ridiculous to his friends – they had after all spent years bullying the boy, and James had spent the better part of the year before being emotionally tortured by the Slytherin – but he had already gone through the sleepless nights wondering if what he was feeling was Stockholm syndrome, or if his feelings were true. He was hopelessly attracted to the man, and he missed him terribly when they weren't together.

Except... their date really had been a disaster. They had barely spoken, and Severus hadn't even picked up on the fact that James was upset until much later. The whole school seemed to be against them. It made sense that their relationship worked best in the shadows, in the confines of Severus' workroom where they could monitor James' symptoms and work on Wolfs' Bane. But James couldn't stay too long, or get too close to the fumes, and when they did speak it was mainly about trivial things. They'd never discussed what they were to each other really – were they dating or were they just fucking? Severus had said he wanted the whole castle to know that James belonged to him but... did that mean James got to tell everyone that Severus' was his? He hadn't even thought about it – he knew he belonged to the Slytherin – he'd given himself up, body and soul, but did Severus really belong to him?

"How am I supposed to answer that?" He finally replied, hating himself for how lost his voice sounded. "That's the situation. We're always going to have Cinis hanging over our heads. We're not the perfect couple, we don't have that much in common but... he understands me."

Remus sighed deeply, shooting Sirius a look which was clearly looking for help. The Black heir shrugged his shoulders in response. Lily rolled her eyes at the two of them.

"I get it." She said, standing as well and taking James' hand in her own. She rubbed her thumb over his wrist soothingly, and James noted that it was actually working to calm him down. She smiled knowingly at him when he caught her eye. "Sev has that feel-safe affect on people. He always seems to know what he's doing and it's incredibly reassuring. When you get past the antisocial behaviour and anger issues he's an easy person to love."

James shot Sirius a look over her shoulder. He was glowering gently, but when he noticed James was looking he coughed and picked up a book like he couldn't really care what his girlfriend was saying. James noted that the book was upside down and let a small smile come unbidden to his face.

"I never said I loved him." He mumbled at the carpet, trying to tell his face to go back to impassive, or even angry. Lily grinned, like he had fallen into her trap.

"Oh, but you do." She said knowingly. "You'd have to love him to openly date him, out yourself to the whole school, be around him as much as you are and be so upset when someone dares question your relationship."

James felt himself becoming increasingly awkward at her reasoning. He'd been resolutely ignoring 'the L word', even in the times it presented itself in his mind – when he'd see Severus wearing the hair-tie he bought him, or see a picture of the two of them pop up in the boys workroom, or when

he could show up at the Slytherin's door and ask for an order and Severus would just understand exactly what James needed. He sat down heavily on his chair and grimaced – he watched as Lily sat back on the sofa and Sirius put his reading material to one side to frown at her.

"I kinda miss Pete in times like this." The Chaser sighed. A chill went through the air, as it always did at the mention of the fourth marauder. Remus hummed low in his throat.

"Me too. He was good at calming you two hot-heads down." He replied. "This whole silent-treatment thing would have been over with hours ago if Wormtail was here."

James snorted in amusement, Sirius huffed.

"I'm justifiably angry that my best friend has been snogging my little brother in some sleazy hotel room!" He shot. "And don't even bother with the explanation – Moony already explained it all and it's not an excuse!" He added as James opened his mouth to protest. The stag animagus closed his mouth again, looking suitably chastised.

"It was just a stupid joke Pads." Remus said, trying to calm his friend. He would have no luck trying to gain permission to date the younger Black sibling if Sirius wouldn't even let one (admittedly heavy) kiss with James go.

"I swear Rem, if it wasn't for the fact that Prongs is a total princess when it comes to the boys he's attracted to I would have murdered him by now." Sirius replied, eerily calmly. James flushed at the words 'total princess'.

"Wh- What's that supposed to mean?" He mumbled. Sirius smirked at him, and it wasn't entirely cruel.

"Come on Jamie, the kids like fourteen and from the looks of that photo you were putty in his hands. You're a princess." He explained. "I mean, not that I like to think about it, but I assume you and Snape are doing the nasty – has he ever let you top, do you even want to?"

There was a short silence in which James realised his three friends were all waiting for his answer, all with identical looks of morbid curiosity. He felt his heart beating faster in his chest, his ears felt hot and he pushed a hand through his hair just to have something to do. He looked away as he responded.

"That's really none of your business."

Sirius snorted.

"So no, then." He answered for him, making James huff, still not able to look at his friends. "So what were you going to do with Reggie, huh?"

James puffed out a long breath of air, glancing at Remus for help, who just sort of shrugged in response, looking hopeless.

"I'm not even attracted to Regulus, okay Sirius?" He replied eventually. "If you must know I was thinking about Sev the entire time it was happening." He added, blushing a little. Sirius frowned, and James could tell he was trying hard not to make his usual gagging motions, which was probably just a show of maturity entirely put on for Lily.

"It doesn't change the fact that you took advantage of my little brother." Sirius mumbled. There was a short pause in which it looked like James was about to apologise, when Remus cleared his throat.

"James wasn't taking advantage of anyone – they both went in to it willingly." He explained. "So drop it Sirius."

Sirius sent him an annoyed look at the command.

"Why should I?" He asked.

"Because you don't get to talk about taking advantage of people." The werewolf seethed, giving Sirius a hard glare. "Now drop it."

Sirius looked at his friend for a long moment, swallowing heavily like all of a sudden a large ball had been lodged in his throat, and then looked down at the ground.

"Fine." He mumbled, then plastered a grin on his face as he looked up at the group. "Anyone for chess?"

Remus took him up on the offer instantly, leaving Lily and James to spare each other a confused look over what had just passed. Since when did Sirius take orders from Remus?

-X-

"You've caused quite a bit of trouble young man."

Regulus smirked at his older Gryffindor, revelling in the words coming from the sandy-haired boy's mouth. They were meeting on the sly, in the library where there was little chance of them running into Sirius – in the old dusty back shelves where generally kids only went to make-out. It was a cliché but Regulus found he didn't really mind. Remus had sent an owl down to the dungeons and he'd eagerly come to the specified location.

"I don't remember doing anything naughty." He replied, biting his lip deliberately and looking up at the Gryffindor through his lashes. He watched delightedly as Remus' eyes fluttered momentarily and he began breathing heavily. *Was that his wand in his pocket or...?*

"That picture of you and James has caused your brother to be quite upset." He explained, putting one hand on the shelf behind Regulus' head and smiling down at the Slytherin. Regulus caught eye-contact confidently. He knew he oozed sex-appeal, it was a Black Family treasure – he'd never used it on a guy before though.

"I never meant it to." He admitted. Remus leant down so he was in the Slytherin's personal space and it occurred to Regulus that he really didn't have to try so hard with the Gryffindor. Remus was clearly besotted with him.

"It's caused me some trouble too." Remus carried on, voice dropping slightly, coming out husky. Regulus swallowed thickly, trying to keep eye-contact despite the fact it now felt harder. Need seemed to pool at the base of his stomach and push downwards, bringing a flush to his cheeks.

He'd been trying to deny his attraction to Remus since the prefect had helped him look for his non-existent cat the year before, and although he had only convinced Remus to go on a study-session with him as an excuse to get to know him more, when the Gryffindor had let slip that he wanted it to be a date Regulus found he couldn't deny the boy. Upon realising the older boy wanted more than friendship Regulus found himself more than happy to oblige. He would usually worry about what his mother and father would think – how would he carry on the bloodline if he was seeing a man? But his attraction to Remus was outweighing his family ties, and besides, he was still young – he could fool around with the prefect now, and maybe settle down with a woman later.

He'd been battling with his attraction to men all summer, when he thought about it – thinking back to the make-out session he had shared with James. He had told Remus he had simply forgotten to destroy the photo, but in reality he had been holding on to it. James was an attractive boy, and a pretty good kisser. He had enjoyed the exploration of another man, and although he had thought about it before, alone in his room, he didn't want to get rid of the evidence that he had been confident enough to actually suck-face with one.

Now Remus was speaking with that irresponsibly sexy low voice, in his personal space in the back shelves of the library. Really, for a boy struggling with his sexuality, and all that meant, it didn't feel fair.

"How did it cause you trouble?" He finally asked, unable to stop himself from staring at Remus' lips when the Gryffindor answered.

"I can't help it." The prefect replied. "I don't like thinking about you kissing another boy. Now I know how good your lips taste, I don't want to share."

Regulus had always thought the whole knees buckling thing was a myth, that no-one could be effected so much by just words to cause ones knees to give way beneath them. Now he knew it wasn't. He caught himself by putting a hand out behind him to hold on to the shelf, and to mask his embarrassment he leant up, catching Remus' lips in a kiss to distract him. Remus kissed back enthusiastically, wrapping his free hand around the smaller boy's waist.

To hell with family, to hell with finding a woman to settle down with, thinks Regulus, he could get used to this.

Quidditch

Quidditch try-outs came about faster than any of the Marauders had anticipated. It was one of those years where most teams had new captains, and when there was new captains, there was generally a mix-up of the teams. As such, Gryffindor, Slytherin and Ravenclaw were all having try-outs. Slytherin had managed to get in first, booking the pitch for the Saturday, Gryffindor the day after, on Sunday, and Ravenclaw had to agreed to squeeze theirs into an evening after lessons on Monday.

Remus sat in the stands, fingers tapping absently against his knee, as the remaining members of the Slytherin team came forth from their changing room in their green Quidditch robes. There was a handful of students in Muggle clothes or day robes hanging around the pitch, waiting for their turn to show off their Quidditch prowess, and among them Remus had little trouble spotting the soft poodle-curls of Regulus Black. That day he was wearing a grey turtle-neck and form-fitting navy trousers, all of which was covered up by long dark robes with embroidered ivy up the back. Remus really only knew his outfit underneath because they'd spent a precious few minutes before try-outs had begun stealing kisses under the bleachers.

Now he was nervous – he was the only non-Slytherin in the stands and it seemed painfully obvious. There had already been a few choice comments about spying for the Gryffindor team. He'd tried to make himself look slightly less conspicuous, choosing to don nondescript Muggle clothes, a blue, round-neck, cable-knitted jumper to protect against the cold and black slacks. In hindsight, the Gryffindor scarf he'd wrapped around his neck to stop the chill hadn't been well thought-out, but he supposed everyone knew he was Gryffindor anyway – there was no real hiding it.

Regulus was steadfastly ignoring him, as per their arrangement. Remus had wanted to come cheer the younger boy on for his first Quidditch try-outs, but there was a multitude of issues to contend with. One; Remus had no business cheering on anyone in the Slytherin team – even if there wasn't a house rivalry, James was his close friend, and captain of the Gryffindor team. Two; No one knew of their secret relationship and both boys wanted to keep it that way for the time being. Three; Sirius Black and James Potter had just turned up.

They scanned the pitch, and then the twenty-something spectators up in the stands before their eyes came to rest on Remus, where he was sat twiddling his thumbs and cursing whatever entity thought it funny to test his patience. In moments, the two other Marauders were by his side.

"Seems like we all had the same idea." Sirius smiled, sitting down heavily next to the werewolf and wrapping an arm around his friend. "Really pumpkin, you should have said you were going to suss out the competition for us, we'd have all come together!"

Remus thought it best not to explain why he'd come to the pitch early and merely managed a weak smile in response. He shot a glance at James, who smirked – motioning with his eyes down to the pitch, where Regulus was mounting his broom.

"I am sure Moony's done a better job than we could anyway." He covered, sitting down on the werewolf's other side. "We really should have been here earlier to get a better feel for the players."

Sirius stuck his tongue out childishly.

"Honestly I'm surprised you even managed to get up that early." He admitted, turning to Remus. Remus eyes were on the sky though, following Regulus' movements as he circled the pitch. The

bludgers hadn't been released yet, but the boy's flying was controlled and his stormy eyes were always roaming for a threat. Sirius followed the werewolf's gaze. "Weird, isn't it? I never really saw him as a beater."

Remus' lips twitched into something that was not quite a smile, but it only lasted a moment before he squashed it down.

"He's like a miniature you." He mumbled instead. James cleared his throat, making Remus turn to him. The messy-haired Quidditch captain rose his eyebrows, trying not to grin too much. Remus scratched at his cheek, suddenly embarrassed. "I mean, in some ways – not all ways. He's much more mature, and-"

"He's two years younger than me!" Sirius interrupted, scandalised that Remus could think his little brother as the more mature Black sibling, even if it was correct.

Remus gulped. James laughed.

"And obviously much more accomplished." The captain assessed as he watched Regulus bat a bludger through the various targets that had been set up to test his skills. Sirius pouted as one of the targets smashed to pieces on impact. Most had dents in, it was rare to see one actually smash. "I think he's stronger too – didn't he beat you up last year?" He added, turning his attention away from the pitch to level Sirius with a curious look like he didn't remember the incident in excruciating detail.

Sirius rolled his eyes, cheeks flushing slightly.

"We may have had a fight in which both of us ended up with injuries." He conceded. He hated being reminded of it, which of course meant James did so at every opportunity. Sirius scrunched up his nose, "Besides, I should think you should know how strong he is – or have you forgotten your summer fling already?"

It was James' turn to blush. Remus would have been annoyed if it wasn't obviously gentle teasing. Sirius was only dishing out as good as he got. James, for his part, seemed to understand that and didn't leap into apologies.

"Well I think I'd have to make out with you to make a direct comparison." He replied casually. Sirius shot him a concerned look. He'd never truly managed to get over the love-potion incident the year before. Then he smirked.

"I'm not kissing anything that Snape's kissed." He teased, sticking his tongue out. James seemed to consider that for a moment, before turning his attention back to the pitch.

They watched as candidates for Beaters, Chasers, Keepers and Seekers all took their turns in trying to outdo each other, until finally try-outs were over and the eager novices were told they would find out who had made the team via list in their common room in a few days time. It was nearing lunch by the time it was all done.

"I'm not sure I'll make them wait that long." James mused as they made their way from the pitch. "I mean, it should be fairly obvious who the best players are – I'll just tell them on the day... do you think that's the right thing to do? I mean, Sally always made us wait..."

He directed his question at Sirius, his fellow team-mate, but the Black heir just shrugged in response.

"To be honest mate, I think I'd rather know on the day."

James frowned.

“Well, you know you’re on the team anyway.”

Remus’ ears picked up at that. He’d been scanning the crowd to see if he could spot Regulus, but at James’ words he turned to their newly appointed Quidditch captain.

“That’s nepotism. You can’t guarantee Padfoot a place – he has to be the best.”

James crossed his arms.

“He is the best.” He responded.

Remus may have been going on to protest further – after all, Sirius was good but there was always fresh new talent and James had been trusted with a position of responsibility and he shouldn’t abuse it – but at that moment Regulus popped out of the small crowd making their way back towards the castle from the pitch, and joined them on their walk.

“I saw you watching.” He said by way of greeting, he said it to Sirius, but shot a furtive glance at Remus as he said the words.

“You were good.” The werewolf replied before he could stop himself. Regulus turned to smile at him, and once again Remus found himself completely blown away by the sheer innocent happiness it portrayed. He wanted to reach out and tug the boy into an embrace, to the point where his hand raised from its position at his side, and he had to forcibly remind himself they were in public and Sirius was walking with them.

The older Black patted his brother on the back.

“You might be able to give me a run for my money.” He grinned. Regulus shrugged.

“If I get on the team then you should watch out.” He replied.

“I think you will.” Remus interjected, then immediately cursed himself for not being able to keep up the façade of not really knowing the younger boy.

Sirius levelled him a searching look, then turned to his brother.

“So, when were you going to tell me about your sexuality?” He asked outright. Regulus’ eyes grew wide in a way Remus found oddly adorable.

“I wasn’t.” Was the short response. Sirius huffed, but didn’t show any other signs of being outwardly angry. He shrugged casually, like he wasn’t really that concerned.

“I mean, you’ve already gone at it with Prongsie, and now you and Moony seem to be getting close – should I be worried that you have a thing for your big brothers friends?”

The reaction was instantaneous. Remus spluttered something along the line of ‘what are you talking about Pads? I’m not even gay!’ and Regulus sort of laugh-hiccaped and quickly excused himself from their group, running back towards the castle at full speed. Sirius turned to Remus.

“I was only joking doll-face, no need to go supernova.”

-X-

The next day saw the boys back on the Quidditch pitch. This time Remus was able to sit in the

stands comfortably, cheering on his favourite players without worrying about who might find out what about his relationship. An added bonus was that Regulus had opted to come and cheer his brother on, and was sat a few seats away from him – not close enough to be suspicious to Lily, who was sat on Remus' right, but close enough the two boys could smile at each other and revel that they had so far got away with their secret relationship.

James was on the pitch, clutching his broom tighter than was strictly necessary. The rest of the team had yet to arrive – strictly speaking try-outs didn't start for another few minutes, but James had been panicking since the day before that nobody would show up – not wanting to be captained by the faggot who was sleeping with Snivellus Snape.

He glanced at Severus now, sat in the stands by Lily, completely straight backed and looking entirely out of place. Remus and Lily were decked out in Gryffindor scarves and red jumpers – Severus was all in black, save for his green snake hair-tie which he was now rarely without. James made a mental note to buy him another one, because that one was getting frayed and dirty from near constant use. He had had a bit of trouble convincing Severus to attend. He'd needed the moral support but Severus hadn't seen what the fuss was in judging a bunch of people flying around on broomsticks. Eventually he had agreed when James had told him as an existing member of the team Hargreaves would be there.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Sirius made his way from the changing room – chatting amicably with two third year girls who James thought might be looking to try out as Chasers. Soon the pitch was filling up with a handful of hopeful candidates and the remaining members of last years team. Sally Wood, their Keeper, and Abraham Jackson, one of James' fellow Chasers, had graduated – so were the main people James needed to replace. But the Captain had a good mind to replace one of their Beaters as well.

Aidan Hargreaves sauntered on to the pitch late, and not in his Quidditch robes. He glared at James and Sirius, and looked up at where Severus was sitting in the stands.

"I'm only here to say I don't want to play on any team captained by a man-slut who's sleeping with the enemy." He spat, "So either you can step down, or I'm out."

James felt the words pierce him. He had been expecting it to some extent, but it still hurt to hear that someone wouldn't want to play such a great game just because the team captain was in a relationship with a Slytherin. Hushed whispers broke out amongst the crowd – James could pick out a few phrases but for the most part it was just white noise. He heard 'Oh yeah, Potter and Snape are... you know,' and 'Do you think he would give information on our strategies to his boyfriend?', or 'I always thought those two hated each other, I can't believe they're shagging', amongst others, and then Sirius shouted for calm.

"Fuck off then Hargreaves" He said when the crowd quietened. "James got chosen to be Captain because he deserves it. You know he's the best player here. He'd never put anything above the game and anyone who believes he would doesn't deserve to be on the team anyway. His private life is literally no one's business, but anyone who does have a problem with him and Snape seeing each other can answer to me."

James could have hugged Sirius in that moment. It was rare enough for Sirius to even vocalise that James was dating Severus, let alone stand up for him about it to others. Hargreaves spat on the ground before walking away, obviously thinking he couldn't take on Sirius and James in one go, with an entire crowd watching. James glanced into the crowds once more to make sure Severus was still there, as the Beater walked away.

"O-Okay then." He managed, gulping down the wave of nausea that passed through him when

faced with the small crowd of people all looking for instruction. He reminded himself that Sirius was correct – he had been chosen to be Quidditch Captain, which had to count for something. He was a confident lad, he shouldn't be so nervous about holding try-outs. He briefly wondered if Sally Wood had ever been this nervous. "Right, urm... everybody in the air then."

And with a multitude of kick-offs and a whooshing of teens into the air, try-outs began. James felt better when he was on his broom, circling the pitch to watch the fresh talent. He called for and judged all the chasers, then beaters, then keepers and seekers, and after some time of putting the candidates through various tests and training, had finally whittled it down to who was likely to be on the team. He landed, wobbling slightly to adjust from the air to the ground, and then waved down those remaining in the air.

"Great job everyone." He smiled, pushing his glasses up his nose, where they often became dislodged in flying. "I was really impressed. Everyone who was on the team last year has managed to keep their place, well done! Which means we will be needed one new Keeper, one new Chaser and one new Beater."

He took a deep breath, looking around the assembled candidates. One of the third year girls Sirius had been chatting to on the way out had been really good, with an arm strong enough that when she had passed the Quaffle to James he had almost been pushed off his broom. There was a fifth year girl who had saved the most Quaffles, although she was nowhere near Sally Wood standard. And a boy, another fifth year, who had muscles that put the rest of the team to shame. He smiled at them all, hoping his decisions weren't going to cause anyone to hate him any more than they already seemed to.

"Jenny, you've earned the position of Chaser. Hyacinth, Keeper – and Hansel, you can be our newest Beater." He nodded, as if affirming it to himself. "Well done everyone for today and I'm sorry not everyone could be picked – but thanks for trying out. Those that were picked, our first practise will be posted on the notice board in the common room within the week."

There was some noise and shoving as the ensemble made their way from the pitch. James watched them go nervously, once more glancing into the stands to make sure Severus was still there. The Slytherin gave him brief nod, arms crossed over his chest, and it was all the reassurance he needed. He watched, amused, as Remus sent yet another look in the direction of the younger Black boy; honestly, for a boy who had managed to keep his lycanthropy and sexuality a secret from most of the school for years, he was terrible at being subtle.

"Sirius?" He asked, grabbing a hold of the boys Quidditch robes to stop him following the rest of the crowd off the pitch. Sirius turned back with a smile.

"What's up man?" He asked. James' lips twitched into a half smile.

"You know, just... thanks – about earlier, with Aidan. And what you said about me and Severus."

Sirius' nose crinkled comically at the reminder of the Slytherin. He looked away, crossing his arms and kicking at the grass of the pitch.

"Yeah well... I don't like the git but, you're obviously not going to break up any time soon." He mumbled. "You... you love him, right?"

James felt his ears heating up at the statement – it was the second time one of his friends has said the word and confronted him about how deep his feelings for Severus went, but he still wasn't sure if he could answer the question. He glanced once again into the stands to see Severus had stood and was making his way from the area. He shrugged in a way that didn't show commitment.

"I... love..." He sighed. "I love being his."

Sirius once more screwed up his face in disgust.

"Dude... I think I've had enough to discussing your personal relationship now. And you stink, lets go shower."

Fantasy

Regulus' high-pitched gasps and pathetic whines filled the air of the small room, and Remus watched as the small, perfect body under him clenched his hands into the sheets, his hips lifted off the bed and he was keening at the attention he was receiving. The noises he was making were driving the werewolf insane, and he looked so beautiful, all hot and bothered – because of Remus. Remus' upper body descended on him, sucking one pink nipple into his mouth whilst he roughly pinched and rubbed the other one. His partner cried out sharply at the treatment.

"Oh, oh – Remus!"

The werewolf continued his punishing behaviour, using his other hand to push the boy's legs even further apart. He was already buried deep inside his lover, and he continued thrusting his hips into the younger boy, focusing on the feeling of their skin rubbing together and Regulus being overstimulated by the friction of their bodies moving as one. He leant back after a minute of harsh pounding and watched his dick fucking in and out of the teen for a moment, mesmerised by how lewd and hot his lover could look in his position. He grunted low in his throat as Regulus turned his head to the side, still making those ridiculously pretty noises, and bared his throat to the older boy.

Fuck, he could just bite him.

The salty sweat on his skin, the veins pumping hot blood underneath, the distinctively manly taste that was Regulus – he would taste fucking delicious.

He continued thrusting into his young lover, pulling obscene noises and a few cherished curse-words from the boy, as he leant forward for a taste, just one taste of that tempting, submissive neck.

He was almost there, he could smell the musky scent of arousal, as he bucked his hips furiously into the teen below him, and had just made contact when a loud clapping noise ripped him from the room.

He woke up groggily, glaring at who had dared to take him away from such an intense fantasy. Sirius was grinning madly, his hands held together, and he clapped a couple more times to make sure Remus was really awake.

The werewolf growled low in his throat.

"Merlin, you're grumpy today, Powderpuff!" Sirius admonished. "And here I was being nice and making sure you weren't going to be late for class. James already left!"

Remus grunted. He could feel the heat at the base of his groin, and looked down to see a sizeable tent in the top-covers. Sirius followed his gaze.

"Ah, I woke you from something pleasant." He realised. "My apologies."

Remus rolled his eyes when he saw Sirius shift from easy-going and care-free, to awkward and embarrassed. It wasn't like they hadn't all seen each other in this state before, but ever since their sexual encounter a year before, Sirius had been especially awkward about actually seeing Remus in any way that wasn't fully clothed and prude.

It was kind of annoying.

Remus knew he should be more accommodating of the eldest Black, after all it was a big thing to sleep with someone, especially if you didn't think you were that way inclined – Remus wasn't sure how he would feel if he woke up one day to find in a fit of madness he'd slept with a woman – but he was really annoyed. That dream had been insanely good, and he had been woken just before he got to the best part.

And he was pissed that his wolfish instincts were taking over enough that biting someone had been the best part of the dream.

Either way, all of the anger and frustration he was feeling is what lead to him saying what he said next, or so he told himself. He stood from the bed in just his pyjama shorts, his dick still hard in them and causing the entire action to look obscene. He crowded Sirius against the nearest wall and leant low so he could whisper in the boys ear teasingly.

"I was just remembering how good it felt to open you up and fuck into you." He murmured in a low, sexy voice. He felt the boy shiver under him and felt a little proud. "You looked so pretty, all bothered and needy – crying out my name like a good little bit-"

He was forcibly pushed away, and found himself a couple of steps away, looking at Sirius – who was leaning against the wall with one hand pressed to the side of his neck and hurt expression on his bright red face. His other arm was in front of him, as if he could keep Remus at bay. The werewolf could easily have overpowered him, and had only allowed himself to be pushed away because he hadn't been expecting it.

"You – we... I thought we weren't going to mention that any more!" The Black heir seethed.

Remus shrugged.

"I think you decided that all on your own." He returned, but his aggression was fading and his morning wood was dying down. It had not been fair to do that to Sirius; and would probably just drag up a bunch of feelings and issues that didn't need to be addressed. Sirius was with Lily and Remus was secretly sneaking around with Sirius' younger brother. Dragging up their one-night-stand from last year, and on top of that, trying to make Sirius feel ashamed of it, had been way below the belt.

Sirius was looking anywhere but at him, but he wasn't running away, which Remus took as a good sign. He was massaging his fingers gently into a spot on the side of his neck, and Remus couldn't help but focus on it.

The werewolf sighed.

"I'm sorry. That was wrong of me." He apologised. "I was lying anyway. I wasn't thinking about that time. I was just mad and frustrated."

Sirius looked at him with unsure eyes.

"Why are you frustrated?" He asked, and seemed to have surprised even himself because the next second he was feverishly backtracking. "I mean, you don't have to tell me, it's not really my

business, I was just curious because, I mean... of what just happened, it must be pretty bad, but you don't have to say, it's not really an issue, I-"

Remus took a couple of steps forwards and caught Sirius' hands where they had been flapping through the air comically as he tried to filibuster his way out of the question he'd asked. He stopped talking the moment Remus caught his wrists and hiccuped. Remus smiled.

"The guy I like at the moment – we're not really in a place where we can move forward. In a sexual respect." He explained. Sirius huffed out a breath of air.

"Why?" He asked. Remus smirked.

"Well, there are emotional issues. He really loves his family, but doesn't feel like he can talk to them about what we have. Neither of us are in a position where we want others to know about our relationship, and I've liked him for a long time, so now that we're finally together it's really hard not to just stop everyone who passes me by and tell them how happy I am." He shrugged, smiling serenely and completely lost in thought about his young boyfriend. "He's not that open with his feelings and I don't know if he feels that this is as special as I feel it is, so I don't want to move things forward if we're not on the same page, or he's not ready – and to top it all off, well... he's also kind of... really young."

He let go of Sirius' wrists as he said this and watched as the other boy frowned, going back to rubbing his neck absently. He felt stupid for opening up so much to Sirius about this, but he could admit that all of what he said had been truthful. He did think Regulus was special, and of course he'd like to move their relationship to more than just stolen kisses – but he also wanted to know how Regulus felt, and it was difficult to read the teenager. There was, as always, the looming fact that Regulus had only recently turned fourteen to deal with, as well.

Sirius glared at him, but it was mostly teasing.

"Are you being a cradle-robber?" He joked, but Remus blushed at the thought. He hadn't thought of it that way before. Sure, he'd always been aware of Regulus' age – but he'd never thought of what that meant. He wanted to jump straight into a serious relationship with the kid, and was not adverse to imagining them getting married and living in a little cottage together when he was bored in Charms, but Regulus was probably just looking for someone to experiment with.

He moaned in embarrassment, pushing his palms into his forehead like he could just keep the jumbled mess of his thoughts to the back. Of course he was the one getting excited about the possibilities of their relationship all on his own.

Sirius frowned some more.

"Wait, just how young is this kid?" He asked.

Remus crossed his arms over his chest. If he gave Sirius too much information he could easily work out that Remus was pining over Regulus, and he didn't think anyone would thank him for spilling the beans. He huffed, beginning to get annoyed again.

"He's just, he's young – okay? I mean, not weirdly young, but just younger than us." He replied.

"Okay..." Sirius responded, looking like he didn't know what to make of the werewolf's sudden reluctance to give out more information. Remus supposed it did sound off. "Well, what's their name then? Do I know them?"

Remus had been dreading this question. He knew he shouldn't have spoken to Sirius about how he

felt – of course it would lead to natural curiosity. He tried to shrug in a nonchalant way.

"I told you, we're not ready to make it public." He found his school uniform and began to get dressed, shooting Sirius a look so the boy turned around whilst he shimmied out of his pyjama shorts.

Sirius frowned at the wall he was now staring at.

"Yeah, but I won't tell anyone." He mumbled.

"You're part of the public Sirius." Remus responded, trying not to let it slip that Sirius was the only reason Remus hadn't been shouting from the roof-tops. He finished getting dressed and snatched up his wand from his bedside table. They had been talking for some time now, and he wasn't sure if they would make it in time for class without having to skip breakfast. His stomach gave a worried grumble at the idea.

"How can I be part of the public, I'm your best friend, right?"

Remus rolled his eyes, walking towards the door and turning his back on his friend. Sirius walked after him.

"I'm not saying. Drop it."

Sirius folded his arms stubbornly.

"I think I deserve to know – who is it?"

"Just drop it!"

Remus' voice came out decidedly low – lower than he thought his voice capable of – in a sort of rough growl. He spun around to gauge Sirius' reaction to the demanding tone he'd used and saw the boy staring at him with a glazed over expression. He lifted his hand once more and pressed three fingers into the side of his neck.

"Yes sir." He mumbled, and then seemed to snap out of his thoughts. "Um... right, we're going to be late for class." He added, pushing past Remus to make his way down the spiral staircase from their dorm. Remus frowned after his back – what had that been all about? Had Sirius just called him 'sir'?

He blushed when he realised his dick was twitching interestedly. He glared down at it, reminding it that he liked Regulus, and any arousal he felt because of Sirius was probably because the two of them looked so alike.

That definitely had to be the reason.

- X -

James was in Severus' work-room later that evening, lying down on the sofa with his head resting gently on Severus' lap. His glasses were off, placed delicately on the floor by the sofa, his eyes were closed and he was breathing evenly, but he wasn't asleep. He'd had a long day where he could barely keep anything down and he was pretty exhausted. He'd been asked by Hansel if their first practise had been decided on yet, and it had been a reminder that he needed to organise it before the end of the week so he could update the team.

He was beginning to think he wasn't cut out to deal with Cinis and the responsibility of being

Quidditch Captain. It took so much out of him just to deal with the daily realities of his illness, keeping up with his studies and trying to maintain a relationship and a social life - how was he supposed to organise Quidditch on top of that? He loved the sport, but before Sally had organised all the behind the scenes stuff, and he just had to focus on catching Quaffles – now he was responsible for coming up with plays, training regimes, booking the pitch, making sure his team was fit and healthy, and he had to know every position inside and out, not just his own. Was he good enough for that?

He hummed appreciatively as Severus carded his long, bony fingers through his hair.

"You are unusually quiet today." The Slytherin stated. He had taken a short break from working on the Wolf's Bane potion only to find his lap full of Gryffindor, and he had yet to find a reason to go back to his work and not just stay playing with James' hair and watching his chest rise and fall with his breaths.

James sighed, but it sounded content rather than annoyed. He opened one eye to look at Severus, although all he could see was a blurred, mostly black shape. He really was incredibly blind without his glasses.

"You don't like Quidditch, do you Sev?" He asked. He watched as the blurred shape moved up and down in what was unmistakably a shrug.

"Not really. I don't really like most sports." He replied, and James smiled at the addition. It wasn't too long ago that Severus would have brushed him off completely – now they were officially dating he got to hear Severus give him information he wouldn't otherwise have thought to share. There was a short pause. "I did... however, I... I enjoyed watching you fly."

James felt himself go pink with delight at the confession. It was probably exactly what he needed to hear.

"I'm just not sure I'm cut out to be captain." He confessed. If Severus was being so honest with him, then he could return the favour.

The Slytherin's hands stopped carding through his hair, and James found he instantly missed the attention.

"Did you not tell me just at Christmas that you wanted to play Quidditch professionally?"

James huffed.

"Well, I do. Except right now I just have so much going on, and Cinis is really exhausting me and -"

He stopped when Severus seemed to bend himself impossibly to place a kiss to his lips – effectively shutting him up.

"Flamouriadesis will not go away, you will have to deal with that your whole life." He responded. James pouted.

"I know, it's just right now that -"

"Don't allow it to consume you."

James took in a deep, fast breath at the words. He scrambled on the floor for his glasses and put them on, and saw that Severus was looking at him with such an honest passion that it made his

heart clench painfully in his chest. He'd never heard Severus say anything that wasn't angry, annoyed or at best indifferent – but that statement had been said in a way that was almost... loving.

He pushed himself up from where he was lying on the boy and looked anywhere but at him. There was something else on his mind that he had wanted to talk about, but every time he tried he either got too nervous or too distracted.

"Hey Sev... you know before, after that whole Hargreaves thing?" He watched, almost in a proud way, as Severus became visibly agitated at the name. "Well, you said at the time that you wanted everyone to know that I belong to you. And you know I'm okay with that. I was just... I was just wondering if that meant that I could... that I might be able to view you the same way."

Severus looked at him for a long moment, frown slowly growing on his features and making James want to take back what he had said. He fidgeted anxiously.

"I don't understand what you're trying to say." Severus eventually confessed.

James blushed, standing so he could take a few steps back from the other boy, just in case he needed to make a quick escape. He hadn't expected to have to spell it out, but reflected that Severus was awful for understanding him when he was panicky.

"What I mean is... I know that I belong to you. And I was just hoping that maybe... you also... belong... to me."

Severus stood quickly from his position and took the few steps to James. He wrapped one arm around his back, keeping him in place, and used his other hand to guide James' chin up so he was forced to keep eye-contact with the Slytherin. He stared at James with such intensity that the Gryffindor wondered if he had accidentally broken the other boy.

"James... I thought you knew." He began, his voice coming out much softer than what James was used to. It was so rare to see the boy so emotional. "Way before any of this started, way before I even realised it... from the day I met you, you were such a big presence in my life – whether it was good or bad. How could you not know?"

James frowned.

"I don't know what you mean." He mumbled, but he wrapped his hands around the material of Severus' shirt because the Slytherin's tone was making him feel incredibly secure.

"James." Severus repeated, breathing out heavily. "I have always belonged to you."

Progress

"I have *always* belonged to you."

The words rang in James' ears over and over again, deep and firm and definitive. A balloon seemed to swell up in his chest to the point where the Quidditch Captain thought it might just burst. He breathed shallowly, trying to restore some semblance of normalcy to his emotions, and caught eye-contact with the Slytherin, who was surveying him confidently. James was hyper aware of the boys robes under his fingers, of his dark eyes staring him down, and his own heart beating wildly in his chest. James had expected Severus' expression to be indifference, or perhaps even his normal mask of mildly miffed, so was surprised to see him wearing a face of open honesty instead. His heart clenched painfully in his chest.

"I love you."

He'd pushed it out into the air between them in a husky whisper, before his mind could catch up with his mouth. It hung between them for a moment, before James registered what he had just confessed, and pushed himself away from the other boy in a panic. He had been about to start ranting about how much he didn't mean it, but his mind was betraying him, telling him how much he really did. There was little point trying to snatch the words back, when they had already been shoved out for Severus to hear. On the other hand, he had no patience to wait for a response, and wasn't entirely sure he wanted to hear one. It was one thing to say they belonged to each other, they always had done according to Severus, and given how James had literally been the Slytherin's slave for some time now, he was okay with that. It was an entirely different kettle of fish to spill out 'the L word'.

Instead of waiting for a response, because Severus was standing slack-jawed in shock, and didn't look like he would be giving one any time soon, he grabbed a fistful of Severus' cloak and pulled the lanky boy down into a lip-bruising kiss.

This he could do, he was a good kisser, and by the way Severus responded; by wrapping his arms securely around his waist and kissing back with fever, James would say the Slytherin agreed.

They traded saliva for a while before Severus broke away with a frown.

"You're attempting to distract me." He stated, and James blushed lightly, having been caught out. He really wasn't sure if he was ready for Severus to respond to his confession, and attempted to lean back up and distract him some more, but Severus caught his wrists and held him firmly in place. He hissed in a discontented breath at the almost painful grip the Slytherin had on him and glared.

"I shouldn't have said that." He mumbled in reply, hoping Severus would just let him forget it had ever happened. The Slytherin, however, frowned deeply and James glanced up to see he had angered the other boy. He was pretty used to seeing Severus angry, and the expression was normal on his face.

"I hate it when you do this." Severus stated, "I told you I would punish you if you lie to me." He added, making James wince. He and Severus were still working out the kinks in their relationship, and whilst it seemed Severus was happy to let up on the orders, he still refused to let James lie. Besides, he hadn't lied. He meant it, he meant it in every way he could think of, but he just wasn't entirely sure he wanted Severus to know how deep his affection for him went. Severus didn't look like he was going to say anything further, and James couldn't tell whether that was a good thing or

not, given what his punishment might end up being. The Slytherin just continued glaring, having a strong hold on James' wrists.

James had been about to tell the boy to get on with it, when a wave of nausea overcame him and he ripped himself away from the other boy to throw-up.

He dropped to his knees on the hard, cold floor and emptied his stomach onto the stones, retching and sobbing quietly at the horrid burn in his throat and the tense feeling of not being able to get in enough air before another wave of vomit expelled from him. His abdomen cramped, his throat constricted and he threw up bile on his third retch, having already emptied his stomach.

Severus fell to his knees behind him and placed a large, long-fingered hand on his back, rubbing it in soothing circles. James choked on a sob and spat out some more bile, arms and legs shaking to hold him up. They stayed like that for a moment whilst waves of sick raked through James' body, leaving him physically weak and exhausted. He'd been sick thanks to Cinis before, but mainly just after a meal, or with some advanced warning, and this new development was scary. He was burning up and couldn't get enough air into his lungs before he was spewing up again.

Eventually Severus stood and retrieve a cold, wet flannel from the bathroom, placing it to the back of James' neck, and brought out his wand to cast cooling charms over his body. James listened to his muttering as he spoke the incantations and tried to focus on breathing properly. After a moment, with most of the heat subsiding, he felt a lot better. His abdomen was still cramping painfully, but it was the ache of an empty stomach, and there was no constrictions in his throat, so he sat back and wiped away the vomit from his mouth.

"Sorry." He huffed. "It came out of nowhere, I'll clean-"

Severus waved his wand lazily, without even speaking, and the vomit on the floor vanished. James puffed out air, turning his head away so he wasn't breathing puke-breath over the Slytherin.

"Thanks." James eventually said, he wondered whether he should remind Severus that he had been in for a punishment, and decided that would be a really stupid move on his part. If the Slytherin had forgotten his intention then that was his own fault. It didn't stop him from realising he would just get the punishment later, when Severus did remember.

The Slytherin was watching James carefully, a deep frown on his features, and after a moment he stood and rummaged through the piles of books he kept in his work room. He pulled out an old leather bound journal and started flipping through the pages thoughtfully. James stood on shaky legs, and Severus sent him a glance at the movement.

"You should go." He advised. "Get some rest in a proper bed and try to avoid known triggers."

He said it in a very matter-of-fact tone, and James nodded his consent feeling disheartened. He'd felt like they had been having a nice evening, but he'd gone and ruined it by confessing his love and then puking everywhere.

Not exactly smooth, he told himself, cursing Cinis for what felt like the millionth time since he had caught the disease.

He went to leave the room, but as he opened the door Severus spoke, making him stall so he could hear the boy.

"I'll come watch your practice – if you don't mind."

James smiled at the door, and breathed out a sigh of relief.

"Please do." He replied, before leaving the workroom in search of a comfortable bed.

- X -

Sirius combed his fingers through Lily's hair and trailed them down her soft skin to the neckline of her uniform shirt. He was loathe to admit that the action was nervous – except for the fact that it definitely was. Lily could obviously tell as well, because she smiled at him reassuringly, and he suddenly felt like an inexperienced virgin under her confident green eyes. They were sat on his bed in the dorm, with no-one else around. Sirius could guess that both of his dorm-mates were off with their respective boyfriends, and when Lily had suggested they make use of the room for some alone time he had jumped on the chance.

He was pretty used to sucking face with her, they'd been doing that since the beginning of the summer when he had visited Lily at her parents home whilst James had Snape over to stay. He had even managed to get in some groping and petting more recently, and it was obvious that Lily was ready to move their relationship to the next stage. She'd been dropping hints all week – making suggestive comments and taking every opportunity to get them alone.

Sirius wanted it too; of course he did. If Lily had been anyone else they would never have waited this long – but she wasn't, Lily was the type of girl you brought home to your parents and the type of girl that you married before you had sex with her. Accept, Lily wanted it now – not after marriage.

And Sirius should have been fine with that, more than fine – ridiculously happy, if he was honest, except Lily was his first serious girlfriend and he'd had a thought in the back of his head that if all went smoothly one day he might marry her, and he didn't want to scare her off by taking things too fast, or ultimately worse, just not being very good.

After all, the other girls he'd slept with had all been on a one-night-only basis, and they hadn't exactly given him feedback on his love-making abilities. Plus, Lily was a virgin. She'd told him as much over the summer, and he couldn't get the thought out of his head. It was one thing to sleep with a girl who had been putting it around, but virginity was like this sacred gift that girls held on to like it was made of pure gold, right? They always said they were 'saving it' for 'the right man'.

Suddenly it felt like a massive responsibility to be 'the right man' for Lily, and he hated to think that she had pressured herself into this because of Sirius' reputation. He had, after all, been trying incredibly hard not to put any pressure on her, from the moment she shyly confessed to still having her V-card.

He leant backward slightly and watched as the red-head confidently straddled his lap. Her thighs, on either side of his legs, were bare, and her skirt had splayed, meaning he could feel the warmth of her knickers through his trousers, and his breath sped up slightly at the idea of it.

Lily leant down and kissed him gently, before trailing her hands down his chest, undoing the buttons of his shirt. He brought his own hands up under her school uniform skirt and hooked them under her lace underwear, grabbing a firm hold of her behind and smirking at the gasps it pulled from his lover. She ground her hips down on to him and he felt himself growing hard in his trousers.

Damn, this girl was beautiful, and talented.

He removed his hands from her underwear to undo her own buttons, and slipped his fingers round the back to unhook her bra. It came loose but he didn't drag it off just yet. He just pushed his hands under the now loose cups and took a hold of the warm breasts. He swiped a thumb over her right

nipple and she gasped again, making him grin.

Everything until this point had been over the clothes, so honestly he would have been happy just touching her for a long while more, but she was more impatient than him, and traveled her hand low so she could fondle him through his trousers. She dipped her head to his neck and nuzzled there, which should have felt nice, but sent a shock-wave of pain through him. He bucked up into her hand at the feeling and she giggled against his neck, mistaking his pain for eagerness.

"L-Lily!" He gasped as she then put her mouth over the spot that was causing his discomfort and began sucking.

She quickly drew away, confidence leaving her at the tone of his voice. It had been way more pained than pleased. He sent her a shaky smile, but his hand was over his neck and his dick had gone limp again.

She pushed herself away.

"I'm sorry... I'm not good..." She mumbled, and at her words Sirius surged forward to comfort her.

"Merlin no, it's not that!" He assured. "You're amazing!"

Lily pointedly looked down at his crotch and crossed her arms over her chest. There had been a sizeable tent there not long before, and now it was wilted and pathetic looking. He grew awkward at her look, puffing out air.

"I thought you would want this." The red-head assessed. Sirius frowned.

"Of course I do." And then: "But I don't want it if you're only doing it because you think I want you to do it." He added. He tried the sentence over again in his head to make sure he hadn't messed it up. Lily sent him an unsure look.

"I want to have sex with you." She replied confidently. Sirius nodded.

"Good." He responded. Lily smiled, uncrossing her arms.

"I hurt you though." She added, a hint of shyness peppering her tone. Sirius bit his lip – he couldn't deny he *had* been hurt. But it felt ridiculous to tell a girl to be more *gentle* with him, and besides, his neck had been sucked, bitten and a multitude of other things plenty of times before and never been sensitive like that.

He sighed. He wanted desperately to show this girl a good time, but the spot on his neck was still throbbing angrily, and no matter how much he imagined having sex with Lily he wasn't even getting a spark of arousal. He was annoyed, literally a minute ago he'd been up for it, and now his traitorous dick was refusing to play ball.

He gulped.

"Look, you know I want this, but..." He waved awkwardly at the entirety of his body and hoped she would understand what he meant. "Maybe we can try this again some other time..."

Lily bit her lip, nodding slowly.

"Of course." She replied, reaching around her back to do her bra back up. Sirius watched her do it forlornly.

"Soon?" He added, just in case, annoyed at himself that it came out as an unsure question. She sent him a little nod, and then leant forward and kissed him.

His neck pinched sharply at the action for some reason, but he refused to let the pain show and end up insulting Lily even more.

"Soon." She replied, although she managed to make it sound like more a promise.

- X -

Remus watched the younger Black sibling's quill scratching across the surface of his parchment in silence. He'd been pretending to read his heavy book in prep for his HEAT for at least half an hour, and Regulus had joined him, mumbling something about needing to get some Herbology homework done.

They were sat in the library, but it was late so no one else was around. They still had a good hour until curfew, but no one was studying at this time of night, except for the hardcore seventh years and people like Regulus, who had forgotten to do their homework that was due for the day after. Of course, most of those students would stay holed up in their common rooms, but since Regulus and Remus enjoyed studying together, they'd begun to converge in the library on more nights than not.

The werewolf was supposed to be swatting up on magical maladies, but had found himself distracted by the soft bounce of Regulus' poodle curls as he bobbed his head in time with the scratching of his quill. Remus wet his lip, trying hard not to think about other activities that they could be getting up to in an abandoned library.

He'd been frustrated since waking up from his dream, but he was also annoyed at himself regarding how he had acted that morning. He couldn't deny it had felt exhilarating to crowd Sirius up against a wall and have the older Black shivering and blushing under him again. It hadn't in any way been fair on Sirius, but Remus had only been thinking about the carnal instinct to claim the boy as his.

Which was why he was annoyed. Because he wasn't interested in Sirius – sure he found the boy attractive (who wouldn't?) but he was currently conducting a secret relationship with his younger brother, so shouldn't even be thinking about trying to get Sirius back into his bed. Furthermore there was Lily to think about, who had appointed herself as his friend. What would she do if she found out that Remus had basically sexually harassed her boyfriend that morning?

Regulus glanced up at him with those stormy grey eyes, and for a moment Regulus was transported back to the last school year, when Sirius had been looking up at him with stormy grey eyes, biting his lip, with a red flush on his face as he took Remus' cock inside him. Remus reached down under the table and pressed a little bit of pressure against his dick, trying to tell it to calm the fuck down.

"You're not reading." Regulus stated, raising a cocky eyebrow and smirking. Remus shrugged.

"Taking a short break to admire you." He replied confidently. Regulus blushed lightly and dipped his quill in his ink bottle to go back to his homework and ignoring the older boy.

Remus found himself wondering how his porcelain skin would taste under his tongue, and was once more plagued with images of Sirius, skin slick with sweat, panting out Remus' name. He gulped lightly and turned his gaze back to his book, although there was no way he could read with his vision hazy and his dick throbbing excitedly in his trousers. What the hell was wrong with him? He was supposed to be fantasising about Regulus, not re-living memories of the one and only time Sirius had let himself get fucked.

He huffed out gently at the thought, remembering the feel of Sirius' fingers on his back, how his ass clenched around him as he came, and that delicious spot on the boy's neck that had stayed purple and raw for days after.

He stood in a hurry when a wave of pain washed over him and made him feel like he'd been punched in the gut, and he had a vague impression of red-hair and freckly skin, before the pain subsided and he was left staring at Regulus again. The young Slytherin had glanced up at the commotion Remus caused, and was now staring at the sizeable tent in his trousers, with a bright red flush on his cheeks.

Remus coughed embarrassedly.

"I have to go." He muttered, sweeping up his book and exiting the library. He had no idea what was going on with him, but he was irrationally angry at Sirius at that moment.

Plus, he kind of needed to sort out his problem bellow the belt.

Cheating

Remus burst into the Gryffindor sixth year dormitory without any form of grace, his long school cloak drawn around him and his heavy book on how to be the best Healer clutched in front of him to obscure his hard-on. Lily jumped about a mile from Sirius, and the werewolf, who had been planning on bypassing anyone in the dorm and heading straight to the bathroom attached so that he might deal with his problem, stopped and sniffed the air.

It smelt like sexual arousal in the room, which was doing nothing to alleviate his issue. He passed his glance over Lily, who looked collected enough, stood about a foot from Sirius' four-poster, except her buttons weren't done up properly. Then he looked to Sirius, who was still sat on the bed, lips reddened from the lipstick Lily was wearing, and an oddly guilty look in his eyes.

He still couldn't get those thoughts from the library out of his head, and decided to stick with his original plan of bypassing them in favour of the privacy of the bathroom. Once he was inside he closed the door behind him and pulled out his wand to magically lock it with a heavy-duty spell – he really didn't want to be interrupted. He rested his forehead against the coolness of the door and heard Lily making her excuses to go.

Good he thought, and then frowned at himself because he'd sounded bitter even in his own head.

He pushed his cloak aside and undid the buttons and zip on his uniform trousers, allowing them to fall and pool around his knees as he grabbed his dick. A grateful sigh left his lips at the pressure, and he began stroking himself.

Then there was a knock at the door.

"Hey Moony, you seemed weird, everything okay?"

Sirius was just on the other side of the door, and Remus couldn't help but be excited by that idea. He placed his hand on the door and continued to stroke.

"I'm fine, just..." He moaned quietly, wondering what he had been planning to finish his sentence with – just jacking-off? Desperate? In need of a good shag? "Busy." He eventually responded, watching his own hand working his dick. He closed his eyes to imagine Regulus there with him, but was frustrated to see images of Sirius instead.

Truthfully he still hadn't really forgiven Sirius for sending Snape after him the year before, and it was probably one of the reasons he'd been so horrid to the boy that morning; bringing up memories they were supposed to have forgotten – or at least never spoken of again. It felt oddly pleasurable to have something on the eldest Black sibling that made the boy squirm. Which was all well and good if Remus was inclined to torture Sirius with it, but it certainly shouldn't be torturing him. He was with Regulus, and he had thought he was very happy with that, but now he was being plagued with memories of how good Sirius' ass felt around his cock, and how amazing his skin had tasted under his tongue and it was all he could think about as he continued to fuck into his own hand.

He heard a hitch in breath on the other side of the door and realised that Sirius had yet to move away. He could smell the animagus through the wood that separated them, and he gulped audibly as he realised that the scent he was smelling on Sirius was arousal. He gripped more firmly on his

dick, trying to stop himself from coming just at the scent of his friends sexual need.

"Are you wanking?"

Remus hadn't expected the question, especially not so forwardly, from Sirius. He bit his lip, hand stilling momentarily, but then went back to what he was doing when he realised the reason he could smell arousal so strongly on Sirius, and hear the boy's breath hitch and fall, was probably due to the fact that Sirius was doing the same thing on the other side of the door.

"Yeah." He confessed, then decided to come forward about how much he could tell about his friend through the wall. "I can tell you are too. Did I cock-block you?"

He heard a short hum, and with his hand on the door he could almost feel the vibration it caused. Was Sirius leaning against the door, jerking-off? He imagined it as he continued to play with himself, bringing his fingers all the way over his head and back down to the base.

"No. We weren't getting anywhere." Sirius confessed, although Remus could hear the nervousness in his voice, like perhaps he wasn't tell the whole truth. The werewolf heard another gasp from the boy, and a waft of Sirius' scent came to his nostrils. He felt himself go light-headed at the scent. He'd smelt arousal on Sirius plenty of times; he had done with all the marauders, it was a by-product of sharing a dorm. However, what he was smelling now was different; Sirius wasn't just aroused, he was shedding off submissive pheromones.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked before his mind could catch up with his mouth. He cursed himself inwardly as soon as he realised what he had done – that was way too personal a question! It was one thing for the two boys to know what the other was doing, they lived in close quarters and given what had happened last year boundaries were pretty much non-existent, but to ask to be let in to Sirius' thought-process was different.

There was a silence for a second in which if Remus strained he could hear the obscene sound of Sirius' hand moving over what was clearly a pretty slicked up dick, and then another wave of submissive pheromones hit him.

Shit, Sirius was definitely thinking about getting fucked, and Remus needed to stop this now before he opened the door and did something stupid. He almost managed to rip himself away from the door, to put a little extra distance between him and the boy, but then he heard Sirius sigh and answer him in an impossibly quiet, mostly embarrassed voice:

"This morning."

The werewolf groaned, handing speeding up on his cock even as he tried to stave off his orgasm. He heard Sirius moan quietly in response and bit down hard on the hand that had been resting on the wall just to bring himself back down to Earth a bit. He huffed out a couple of breaths, trying to keep himself on track.

"What – What about Lily?" He questioned. His body was pissed at him for bringing up the boy's girlfriend when all it wanted to do was rip open the door, press Sirius to the nearest bed and fuck him open, but his mind was trying desperately to hold on to sense – they were both with other people, and should not be doing this at all. Hopefully if he reminded Sirius that he was not only straight, but had a girlfriend, then the animagus could remove himself from the situation.

Instead he heard Sirius moan again, a bit louder this time, and almost annoyed.

"What are you thinking about?" He mimicked Remus' earlier question, ignoring what he himself

had been asked. Remus didn't think he'd be able to hold out much longer if he didn't find some way to end this. He breathed heavily through his mouth, trying to stop the waves of submissiveness he was getting from Sirius from assaulting his nose, and focused for a moment on the sound of Sirius enjoying himself on the other side of the door, whilst he feverishly pumped his own dick. He completely ignored the question, mostly because he didn't think 'having you on your knees and begging for my cock' would go down that well with his friend.

He gulped, and in the moment after he took another breath through his nose, and lost all sense of control at the scent Sirius was giving off.

"Fuck, Sirius – are you fingering yourself?"

There was an almost indignant cough on the other side of the door, but Remus honestly couldn't think of any other reason that Sirius' scent would be that submissive.

"No!" Sirius huffed, but the image was already in Remus' mind now, and he grinned at the door.

"You should." He said, and he could hear the cheeky smirk in his own voice and could only imagine how that was effecting Sirius in the other room. He muttered the lubrication spell under his breath and delighted in the squeak in bought forward from the boy. He waited a moment, and then when he couldn't stand it any more, and was feeling dizzy from how good Sirius smelt, he said: "Are you doing it? Does it feel good to have fingers inside you?"

The silence he heard in return was more than enough to know that Sirius had done as suggested and the werewolf stilled his hand on his dick and concentrated on listening to the other room. There was some definite slick sounds and gasps of breath that Remus recognised all so well from when he had taken Sirius the year before.

He probably would have been content to listen to Sirius get himself off on his own fingers, but then the eldest Black boy's breath hitched again and he spoke in a desperate, needy voice;

"R-Remus."

He undid his locking spell, and had his trousers back up for ease of movement, in less than a second.

"I'm coming out." He warned the boy, and had just enough time to hear Sirius' put up a half-hearted protest before he practically ripped the door off it's hinges in his eagerness.

He was greeted with the sight of a flushed, needy Sirius – standing with his legs spread far apart, one hand holding him upright against the wall next to the bathroom door, and two fingers of his other hand still in his ass. He looked at Remus with his lips parted, eyelids heavy and naked body on show, as he removed his fingers gingerly, flushing as if ashamed. Remus picked him up in one swift motion and threw him down on to the nearest bed, which luckily was actually Sirius'.

He descended on the boy, kissing, swirling his tongue and grazing his teeth all over the boy's body, which arched and tensed under his touch. He quickly discarded his own clothes and the two boys had a moment of just being in each other's warmth: naked, hard and needy. Then werewolf pulled the curtains around the bed to a close and grabbed his wand from his cloak pocket, locking the dormitory door, before he pushed Sirius' legs up, spreading them wide. When they were in the position he wanted them in, and he had convinced Sirius to hold them there, he circled the boy's entrance with his thumb, and pushed inside.

"Ffffuck!" Sirius moaned loudly, throwing his head back against his pillows and making

Remus grin. Waves of need and arousal were radiating from the boy beneath him, and Remus just wanted to torture the Black sibling for a little longer before he buried himself inside him. He pressed down with his thumb on the sensitive skin of the boy's hole and delighted in the lustful keen it dragged from Sirius. He swirled his thumb, rubbing against the boy's entrance and pushed in and out lightly.

Sirius had been fucking himself with two fingers, buried as far as they could go in, so Remus had no doubt his thumb was doing a lacklustre job of filling him in comparison. He was doing it deliberately though – he could smell the need and submissiveness coming off of the boy and wanted to hear him beg to get fucked.

He continued to tease him with this thought in mind, and had to bite his lip hard to stop from abandoning his own plan when Sirius moaned softly and pressed the side of his face into the pillows, baring his neck.

Remus was on it in an instant, biting, licking and sucking at the spot he had the year before. It had remained purple and swollen for days and he wanted a similar affect now. Sirius all but screamed at the feeling, body arching upwards to create more contact, and words spilling from his lips that Remus had no doubt, should the boy have been in a sane state of mind, he would never have allowed to happen.

"Fuck, yes! Remus yes! Oh fuck, please! More, give me more, please... Please, Remus. Yes!"

It was more then the werewolf could have hoped for, and he wasted no time in burying two fingers into the boy, stretching him out and quickly adding a third to work him up to take Remus' cock. After all, that was definitely what he wanted, from the way he was continuing to beg and try and fuck himself on his partners fingers.

He paused for a moment, removing his fingers, when he thought Sirius was ready, just to survey the boy under him. Sirius was flushed, panting, legs spread wide with his hands holding them under his knees, and despite the fact that he hadn't been touched there for awhile, his dick was still so hard it looked almost painful. There was already the beginnings of a bruise on his neck, much to Remus' delight, and he was sweating, twitching and looking at the werewolf carefully as Remus drank him in to his minds eye.

Then he lined himself up, crawled over the boy so there chests were squished together and his dick was pressing against the other Gryffindor's entrance, and pushed into him. He watched Sirius' face as he did this, and was happy to see the boy was obviously not in any pain, but just overwhelmed by the feeling of his friend entering him. He pushed in a little further, rocked out a little to ease some pressure off, and then buried himself in the rest of the way.

Sirius gasped under him at the feeling of Remus' balls connecting with his skin, and took his hands off from where they had been holding his legs in place to circle around the werewolf's neck. Remus caught eye contact with him, and began rocking back and forth, fucking into him. Sirius pressed an open-mouthed kiss to Remus' lips and moaned when he felt a tongue sliding along his own. Remus kissed like he fucked; teasingly, followed by strong, assertive movements with his tongue that made Sirius go light-headed.

It didn't take long before Remus was fucking into him much faster, with more force, so that all Sirius was able to do was gasp in short breaths of air and expel them again with high-pitched 'hah's.

Remus was ashamed of himself for loosing control so quickly, usually he was a much more thorough lover, but this had been a long time coming, and Sirius felt so good, clenching around him. He rested his head on the boy's shoulder, and reached down between them to tug at the boy's

erection. Sirius moaned loudly at the contact, and a few thrusts later Remus was coming, shooting his load into his partner with held breath. He pumped furiously at Sirius' dick to bring him up to completion and huffed a sigh of relief when he spilled over about ten seconds later.

He gingerly pulled out of the boy and flopped down next to him on the bed. Sirius was staring up at the canopy of his four-poster, breathing heavily through his mouth – chest rising up and down comically fast. Remus watched him cautiously. There had been nothing calm, gentle or romantic about their fucking – it was obviously just a need they both had, which culminated at the same time. There was nothing wrong with two guys helping each other out, right?

Fuck, they were the worst. Sirius had cheated on Lily, and he had cheated on Regulus – and there was really no other way of looking at it.

He gulped down his anger at himself as he caught sight of the tempting purple bruise on his partner's neck. How in Merlin's name was Sirius going to explain that one? He bit his lip. Why had Sirius been so desperate to get fucked anyway? The boy was quite clearly... He almost laughed at himself, he was about to say Sirius was straight, but that was evidently not the case. Having sex with a male friend once was curiosity, doing it again – no less asking for it so desperately – that was bisexuality.

Their entire dorm was queer.

He sighed, and Sirius glanced at him with stormy grey eyes that reminded Remus so much of his younger brother. He felt guilt swelling up inside him – no matter how frustrated he was that he wasn't taking it to the next step with Regulus, that never gave him an excuse to fuck anyone else – especially not his older brother. He grunted, angry at himself, and disentangled himself from the bed, and Sirius' limbs, to find his clothes.

"Where are you going?" Sirius asked in a small voice. Remus felt a spark of arousal at just how docile he sounded, but squished it down. He had only come a few minutes ago and there was no way he could have climbed back on for another round straight away, even if he was inclined to.

He turned to the eldest Black sibling, who had sat up in bed with a wince, and was pulling the covers around himself to save some dignity. He stooped low and picked up an elastic hair-band from the floor, it was light blue in colour and Remus had no doubt it belonged to Lily. It had probably been left there from the activities Lily and Sirius had been up to before Remus burst into the room. He handed it to Sirius with a frown.

He was supposed to be Lily's friend; she had been accepting of his sexuality and candid with him that she did worry that Sirius might like him as more than a friend – and he had massively betrayed her trust by bedding her boyfriend.

The guilt that was swelling in him seemed to settling in his stomach and make him feel sick.

He wanted to tell Sirius that they should fess up, tell their respective partners what they had done and face the consequences, but he could also imagine the look on Regulus' face. Regulus had once been worried that he was only a replacement for Sirius, and Remus didn't want to encourage that idea.

"I'm going to study." He eventually lied, quickly leaving the room, and Sirius, behind.

Flight

The first Gryffindor Quidditch practise of the year went nothing short of terrible. Because James had left it too late to book the pitch, when he finally approached McGonagall about the subject, the only date left for that week had been Friday, and he'd had to take it, or he risked the other teams getting too far ahead. He had taken Severus' Painkiller Potion in the morning, but still felt dizzy and hot by the time classes had finished and it was time to head to the pitch.

He spent some time in the changing room with the team, all in their Quidditch robes, discussing strategies and plays and taking some time to get to know the new members, before they actually hit the pitch. His fellow Chasers were Jenny and Damien. He'd been playing with Damien for four years now, and they had a good rhythm between the two of them, but Jenny was new, and only a third year, so she was somewhat smaller than the other two Chasers – which James wasn't unduly worried about, but Damien seemed wary of the fact that she was, for all purposes, a little girl. James would have to watch them to make sure Damien wasn't treating her as if she had a handicap. He had a new Beater as well, to join Sirius; a stocky fifth year named Hansel, who seemed serious about the sport and had been suggesting things all strategy session – James instantly warmed to him. Mark, their seventh year seeker, was anything less like a seeker than James had ever seen, with a body-builder's physique and firm set, bushy eyebrows. However, James had seen him fly and had faith in his ability. Which just left their new Keeper – Hyacinth. She was a petite fifth year, with curly blonde hair and pretty brown eyes, and she had definitely been the best at try-outs, but she had been watching James carefully since he entered the room with a cold, almost calculating stare, and he couldn't shake the feeling there was something going on beneath the surface. He resigned to keep an eye on her, looked out the window to see the sun had set and they had been in the planning stages for far too long, and ushered the team out on to the pitch.

He had been looking forward to flying again – there was something completely unique about flying that made it relaxing and exhilarating at the same time. He attempted to shake off the brief worry that he was a little too hot and bothered from Cinis to give his best flight today, mounted his broom, and kicked off, only to find himself still on the ground, with the rest of his team circling above him looking down at him with confused expressions.

He tried again to kick off, but only managed to hover for about ten seconds a few inches above the ground before his broom gave out. He frowned, he had owned the broom since he was twelve, and he supposed it was getting a little old – was it faulty?

"Having some trouble there Cap?" Asked Mark, voice deep but a bit worried. James frowned again, dismounting his broom embarrassedly.

"I think it's faulty. Hold on, I'll go get a school spare – for now just split into two groups and run some plays."

He watched as the team divided themselves into two parts and began circling the pitch. He quickly released the Bludgers and the Snitch so they could play a fake game, and threw a Quaffle into the air, before making his way to the pitch store cupboard to get out a spare broom. He picked out a dusty 'Ranger' model with a grimace, brushed it down and tried to kick off with that, but once again found himself firmly on the ground.

A flush of anger rushed through him and resisted the urge to throw the damn broom at the ground, or break it over his knee, and then the anger turned to fear.

Was he grounded? Had he lost the ability to fly?

He glanced into the crowd where Severus was sat with Lily. The red-head was talking animatedly to her friend, but Severus' eyes were firmly fixed on James. He would have been flattered if he wasn't a little preoccupied with the fact that he couldn't fly. Was this a weird Cinis side affect he didn't know about? He could deal with the illness costing him his appetite, his balance, and his ability to keep calm, but if it cost him the ability to fly then he was about three seconds from losing it. He needed to fly – it was the only time he felt like nothing could touch him.

He took a steadying breath, clutching uselessly at the Ranger, and at his own Comet, neither of which were any help to him. Severus would have known if Cinis could affect his flying, and would have told him the moment James had confessed he wanted to play Quidditch professionally – or at any point since then. There had to be some other reason why he couldn't get in the air.

He watched dejectedly as Sirius and Hansel batted a Bludger between the two of them, showing off different manoeuvres to each other. It continued on for a moment before Sirius caught sight of him, beat the bludger straight up to buy some time, and flew down to meet him.

"What's wrong?" He asked the moment he landed, and James sighed, shaking his head.

"I can't get it up." He replied, then flushed when he saw a cheeky smirk on his friend's features. "The broom! I can't fly!" He hastily corrected. Sirius frowned away his previous amusement, and took a hold of James' Comet. Within seconds he was in the air, straddling James' broom. Which meant it was definitely an issue with James. He flew back down and landed next to his friend with a worried expression.

"Is it Cinis? He asked, but James shook his head.

"I don't know. I don't think so..."

Sirius crossed his arms.

"You've been flying your whole life – why would you not be able to now?"

James felt a lick of anger inside him again. He didn't know, for Merlin's sake! He clenched his fists at his side and tried to bite down the angry responses his mind formed for him. It wasn't Sirius' fault he was grounded, and yelling wouldn't make anything easier. He grew pale as the rest of the team flew down to meet them. Hansel and Damien were wrestling with the Bludgers, Mark held the Snitch in his hand, and Jenny had the Quaffle under her arm. Their game was obviously over, and James hadn't even managed to get his feet off the ground... he was going to fail them as a captain.

He glanced at Severus again for support, and noticed how Hyacinth, their new Keeper, followed his gaze.

"Why aren't you flying?" Asked Mark, at the same time Hyacinth asked:

"Are you telling your boyfriend our plays?"

James glared at her, ignoring Mark's question for now.

"Severus doesn't even like Quidditch – he doesn't care which team wins the cup."

Hyacinth raised her eyebrow and pursed her lips.

"If he doesn't like Quidditch then why is he here?"

James felt the anger flicking through him, electrifying him and begging him to put his girl in her place. He gulped down to keep it in check. He was pretty used to questions like that at this point, and knew he was only reacting so harshly because he was struggling with the idea of not being able to fly.

"He's here to support me." He finally answered, digging his nails into his palms to keep his anger at bay. He expected Hyacinth to come back with another pushy question, so was surprised when instead it was Damien who piped up.

Damien and James had been Chasers together on the team for the last four years, and knew each other pretty well, so most of the time James put a lot of stock in what the boy had to say.

"Support? Like, as in... moral support? It's only practise, why would you need something like that?" He asked, and James knew he was only curious. "Are you so dependent on him?"

That, however, made James wince. Hell yes he was dependent on the Slytherin, and he wanted Severus with him every hour of the day just to tell him he would make it through the mood swings and nausea that Cinis threw at him, but he could hardly explain that to the team. He took another breath, trying to calm his nerves. He wanted to yell at them all that Lily was in the stands as well, but didn't think it was fair to throw Sirius under the bus as well.

He was beginning to feel really dizzy, and he wondered how long they had been out in the pitch. The sun had set and it was lit up by the flood-lights. They'd been a long time in the changing room so did that mean that he was passed the time he needed to collect the Elixir? He glanced into the stands again to see Severus was no longer there, and a wave of panic washed over him. He took a step forwards, into the little crowd the team had made, in an attempt to go find his lover, but as he stepped his lost balance and went sprawling towards the ground.

He would have made contact, and probably broken his nose as he was heading face-first towards the ground, but strong arms caught him around the middle and hoisted him back up, bringing him securely against a lightly muscled chest. He turned to see his saviour and breathed a contented sigh of relief on catching eye-contact with Severus. Once again the man had come to his rescue, and he smiled a little at the thought.

"I think we rather lost track of time. Good thing I was about." The Slytherin muttered, smirking. He pulled a phial of recognisable potion from his pocket, allowed it to grow in size, and gave it to James, who gulped it down thankfully. He shivered at the feeling of it working through his body, and crowded in slightly closer to Severus instinctively.

There was a short silence, and then Hyacinth spoke up.

"Was that a love-potion? Is that how you're making James Potter your bitch?"

James flushed at the statement, both embarrassed and angry, and had spun to yell at her, but Severus placed a hand on his wrist firmly, his eyes almost bored.

"Don't rise to it." He ordered. "You must understand that you are unable to fly because you are allowing it to overtake you? You are so weighed down by your fear that it might affect your sport, that it has done. I told you the other day not to let this consume you."

James bit his lip, the whole team was staring at them, and he desperately wanted to tell Severus to fuck off so he could yell at their new Keeper and tell her where she could shove her love-potion ideas, but a part of him still couldn't help but obey the man's orders. His anger quelled a little, and redirected towards Severus – he would have appreciated it if Severus had been able to explain that

to him when they were alone in the work-room the other day, and he suddenly had a thought that Severus had only wanted to observe his practise so he could see whether James was allowing it to be affect by Cinis.

Sirius jumped to his rescue.

"Right, I say we leave the love-birds to it – practice dismissed."

James should have been happy with that. It would give him time to talk to Severus and take the nosey on-lookers away, but anger flared through him again.

"It's not dismissed!" He yelled, and as soon as the words left his mouth he knew he'd made a fool of himself. The team had begrudgingly dispersed at Sirius' words, but turned back to him now with confused and weary expressions. James looked at the floor and grumbled lightly. "I mean... for fucks sake..." He sighed. Sirius looked like he was about to say something, but he held up a hand for silence.

He looked at the ensemble of Quidditch players. It wasn't fair to them to have a Captain who couldn't even get off the ground. He needed to get a grip on his illness, and his anger, if he had any hope of playing professionally one day. He glanced once more at Severus, who was eyeing him cautiously.

"Before you go, you need to know..." He huffed. He couldn't believe he was about to confess this to everyone. "The reason I couldn't get off the ground is because I'm... I'm ill."

The team exchanged glances.

"So go see the nurse." Suggested Hansel, making James smile lightly.

Severus put a hand on his shoulder, and watched him closely, but didn't stop him from explaining more. James knew he should have owned up much sooner – it wasn't really something to be ashamed about, but if it was going to affect his sport then his team deserved the explanation.

"It's not that easy. I have an illness called Flamouriadesis, which is critical, but lays mostly dormant for a week at a time." He explained. "The side effects include mood-swings and being... well, physically being a little weaker. Amongst many others."

He added in his head that it was a lot weaker, but given that he was their Captain, he didn't want them to lose too much faith in his ability to catch a Quaffle. He shrugged at their concerned looks.

"So it stops you from flying?" Jenny asked, she looked genuinely sad for him, and James felt the urge to comfort the third year. This was a girl who obviously understood that not being able to fly was pretty much the end of the world.

"I've had it since last summer, and I played fine all last year – so please don't think I can't fly because I can." He assured them all. "Severus was just explaining that my mood is what is effecting that. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to play well today because the weeks up and I needed another dose of the Elixir that makes it recede, and that's what made me unable to fly."

Damien, his fellow chaser, moved forward and looked as if he was about to pull James into a hug, but looked at Severus and then stepped back again, coughing awkwardly. James hadn't seen Severus do anything, but with all the talk of who James belonged to recently, he could get a pretty good idea of the expression on Severus' face if the Slytherin thought James was going to get a hug from someone who wasn't him.

"So you take the potion every Friday." Damien deduced. "What happens if we have to play a match on a Friday, or you have a mood-swing when you're already in the air and suddenly you can't fly any more?" He asked. James hadn't thought about it, but suddenly the idea worried him. They could reach ridiculous heights when playing, and if his ability to fly suddenly gave out when he was already fifty feet in the air, he could fall to his death. He rubbed the material of his Quidditch sleeves worriedly, and Severus stepped in.

"That will not happen so long as James remembers that the ability to fly is his to control – it is not directly a result of his illness, but of his own self-doubt. As such he just needs to be reminded that he an excellent Quidditch player."

At this he turned to James with a small smile, and James had to look away at the praise. He heard Jenny, and possibly even Hyacinth, let out a small 'aww' at how couple-y they were being, and realised that this was probably the first time Severus had shown him any form of affection when they were in public. He thought that he really didn't mind the idea of PDA, should Severus wish to do more of it in the future.

Then Sirius gagged.

"Can I go now?" He asked, directing his question at James, and point blank refusing to look at Severus. The Quidditch Captain quickly nodded and dismissed the team, feeling like he had got something off his chest. He returned the 'Ranger' to the shed and held his own broom in his hands.

He yelped when Severus pulled his forward into a firm embrace, and saw out of the corner of his eye that the team, who had been making their way to the changing room, turned around to look again at the noise. Severus did not seem concerned, however, as he held James' chin up with his thumb and his black eyes bore into James'.

"Get on the broom and kick off." He ordered, releasing his prisoner. James clutched his broom a little tighter, but nonetheless mounted it and attempted to get off the ground. He couldn't shake the feeling of not being good enough though, and he stayed firmly on the grass. Severus rose an eyebrow. "Did I not make it clear that you are an excellent flyer, and your self-doubt is unwarranted?" He asked, making James flush slightly at the praise.

It was one thing to say it, but was it true? He tried kicking off again, and this time he hovered for a moment before dropping back down.

"You were made Quidditch Captain for a reason James – Cinis can not effect your ability to fly. You are in control." Severus told him, and James bit his lip.

He had been made Quidditch Captain after he had contracted Cinis, he knew it couldn't effect his flying. He kicked off once more and this time rose into the air, flying higher. He handled the broom and felt his worries wash away as it bent to his command. A weight seemed to lift off his chest, and he let out a small, delighted laugh as he was able to bring the broom into a swoop, and then rise again.

Severus clapped politely from his spot on the pitch floor, and James grinned down at him. He landed the broom, all but falling off it, and rushed to Severus' side.

"I love you." He told him, when he got there. He couldn't deny it, he did. "I don't expect you to respond to that, or say it back to me. Just know that I do."

Severus rose his eyebrow at the confession, and dragged the Gryffindor to him to increase their body contact. James dropped his broom to the floor and circled his arms around the taller boys

neck, sighing contentedly as Severus kissed him, and pressed his long fingers on one hand into the small of his back. His other hand buried itself in James' now windswept hair and tilted his head to get a better angle to continue their make-out session. James didn't even care at this point that Severus had still yet to reply to his confession. He had now told the boy twice that he loved him, and he got the impression he would be saying quite a few more times until Severus was ready to say it himself, but he was okay with that. Severus looked out for him when he needed him to, he had trusted in his decision to tell the team about his illness and had praised James enough that he had given him the best gift in the world – he had given him his flight back.

And James loved him for it.

He broke away from their kissing with a smile when he needed to take breath, but it slowly faded when he saw Severus' frown.

"W-what's wrong?" He asked.

Severus smirked, and James got the distinct impression he had just led himself into a trap.

"You have just reminded me, that I owe you a punishment."

James gaped at him for a moment, having forgotten that Severus had been planning one last time they were alone together in his work-room, and then immediately begun spluttering his protests.

"Wait a second, that was for lying, and I wasn't lying – I do love you!" He confirmed. Severus only continued to smirk wickedly.

"Ah, but then you attempted to distract me, and told me you shouldn't have said it – when clearly you should have. You've been a naughty boy, and deserve to be punished." He replied. James couldn't help it, his cock swelled with interest at the words 'naughty boy' and he felt like a pervert for even considering it a turn on. He flushed furiously as Severus held him in place. "Now what should your punishment be? Should I have you dress up in a lewd maid's outfit and clean my room for me? Or maybe I should fuck you repeatedly and not let you come?"

James grew breathless at both those ideas, glad that his heavy Quidditch robes did a fairly good job of concealing his obvious interest. He was in way too deep if the idea of being forced into a degrading outfit, or having his orgasms denied was actually getting him off. He swore he never used to be this messed up, but after months of Severus' "punishments" for one thing or another, he was starting to realise they weren't always punishments.

He was about to put in his two-sickles-worth, because he oddly really liked the maid's idea, when Severus' smirk grew to being positively evil, and James knew he had come to a decision and wouldn't matter what the Gryffindor said.

"Or maybe I should just put you over my knee."

Advice to a Younger Self

Whatever James had been expecting, it hadn't been that.

He stared at Severus in open mouthed shock, even as his cock swelled at the idea, bringing him to full hardness.

Well damn, that was new.

Severus took him by the hand and lead him over to the small bench at the side of the pitch, that was usually there for Pomfrey to sit on during games, so that she could act as a first aider if anyone got injured. He sat down, and tugged on James' hand so that he stumbled.

"Wait! Here? Now?" He exclaimed when Severus tugged again, and manhandled him so that he was lying face down across the man's lap. He instantly felt blood rush to his head as he stared down the grass and felt Severus hitching up his Quidditch robes. It occurred to him that his team would probably still be in the changing rooms, even as his dick twitched interestedly, now rubbing against Severus' thighs. The Slytherin hummed in response.

"Here, and now." He repeated back to the boy, and pulled on James' uniform trousers and underwear so that they were caught around his mid-thighs, leaving his bare ass presented nicely. From his position sprawled across the Slytherin's lap he could feel Severus' erection pressing into him, and flushed slightly as he realised that meant Severus could feel his just as easily. He blamed his red cheeks on the blood rushing to his head, and placed his hands on the ground to steady himself.

This was mortifying. He hadn't been spanked since he was a kid!

Slap.

James gasped at the hand brought down on his behind, and the force behind it, that rocked him, and his dick, into Severus' thigh. The hit had stung, and then instantly been replaced with the pleasure of the extra stimulation to his cock – which was an insanely odd feeling – but not unpleasant.

Slap.

He clenched his fists on the ground, annoyed at himself for the pained yelp that had escaped him on the second contact. Severus wasn't holding back, and the hits damn well hurt.

Slap.

He whimpered slightly, trying not to yell, lest he inform the team, who were changing not thirty feet away, of his situation. Merlin though, he couldn't tell whether he was mortified or dizzy with arousal – and decided maybe it was both.

Slap.

Severus was alternating his hits to each cheek, giving each one just enough time to stop stinging, and fade into a dull throb, before he assaulted it again. Each hit sent a clap of noise into the air, and in the otherwise quiet of the pitch they were as loud as thunder. Always closely followed by James' half-gasps-half-sobs.

Slap.

If he had been in a more sane state of mind, James might have been annoyed at how easily he was getting off on this. He was, however, more than aware enough to be insanely embarrassed by the long, wanton moan that the fifth spank bought forth from him. Severus' hands stilled for a moment, and then he chuckled lightly, and brought his hand down again.

Slap.

"S-Severus, please!" James cried, although he couldn't tell if he was begging for his partner to stop, or never stop. His dick was getting pushed into Severus' thigh with every forceful strike, and that, mixed with just how much blood was circling round his head, had him writhing and moaning unabashedly.

Slap.

He cried out again, and berated himself. He really needed to get his noises under control – or any moment now the team would come investigating and see him getting his ass spanked like a bratty kid... and how much he was enjoying it.

Slap.

Merlin, he wouldn't be able to sit easy for awhile. He sobbed gently, trying to keep his voice low, and felt a curl of humiliation in his stomach as Severus chuckled again. Despite this, he was still achingly hard and had to physically stop himself from rutting forward against his lover's leg. Damn, he never knew he was quite this messed up.

Slap.

"Oh Merlin Sev, I can't..." He cried, scraping against the ground with his fingernails for purchase and choking out another sob. He felt sick with need and pain mixed together, and had goosebumps all over.

"Just one more now." Severus spoke, voice low in the way that never failed to calm James. He choked again, disgusted as he felt drool seeping out of his mouth, and tears streaming down his face. Was he really this pathetic that he couldn't even take a spanking without crying? He tried to shake his head, to communicate in some way that even one more was too many, and winced as he felt Severus' hand on his ass. Except... he wasn't smacking, just placing it there. He breathed in and out heavily, trying to stop his tears. "Come now James, you've done so well. You can take one more." Severus told him, but he didn't move his hand.

James felt the arousal he had been feeling since before his punishment began pooling at the base of his stomach at the words, and his eyes grew wide at the familiar feeling. Shit, he would never live it down if he got off on Severus' spanking enough to actually orgasm. He tried desperately to think of some way to get out of that last smack, wishing the ground would just open up and swallow him... except, the Slytherin's words had been almost proud, and James couldn't shake his insane desire to please this man. One more smack, okay... he could do that. He shivered in anxiety, but discretely nodded his head.

Slap.

The smack felt like it had enough force behind it to start a hurricane, and rocked James into Severus' thigh for a final time, ripping a pained 'ah' from the Gryffindor, even as the arousal that had been pooling in his gut suddenly went into overdrive and ripped through him. He held his breath for a second and let it out slowly with his release, absolutely mortified at himself as he felt the hot sticky semen squish between his dick and Severus' uniform trousers. He gulped.

He'd probably just earned himself another five smacks, his brain supplied before he could stop his own thought-process, and he winced at the idea of how much over-stimulation that would bring. As it was, Severus' entire body went rigid, and he placed his hand down slowly and delicately on his lover's bared ass. James let out a shuddered breath.

"You came." Severus observed, as if it wasn't the most obvious thing in the world. James thought he might just have a heart attack at how calmly he said the statement, but squeaked out a confirmation nonetheless.

"It's only because of the position, I've been rubbing at your leg this whole time!" He tried to excuse himself, twisting round in an attempt to glare at the other boy. Severus knew he had some messed up sexual kinks, but this was on a whole different level, and he would just die of embarrassment if he was teased about it.

Severus helped him to stand, and pulled his clothing back around him, adjusting it so it didn't look like they'd done anything untoward. James could feel the material of his underwear on his blistered behind and wondered how long it would be before he could forget this ever happened. At this rate every time he dressed in the morning he would be simultaneously ashamed and hopelessly turned on.

The Slytherin pulled out his wand and cleaned the mess that James had made on him, making the Gryffindor avert his gaze embarrassedly. He wanted to run the hell away, but he couldn't get Severus' words out of his head, and how proud he had sounded when he had said them. It occurred to him that Severus had been hard as well, and he glanced down now to see the man still had an erection. He gulped anxiously.

He should say something, or do something, he told himself, but he didn't know what to do or say that wouldn't make the entire situation that much more mortifying for him. Severus smirked at him, and the humiliation of it all made James take a step back. He honestly couldn't deal with it if Severus started teasing him.

"Come with me." The Slytherin ordered, and lead him out of the pitch back towards the castle. James had a pretty good idea they'd be heading straight to his work-room, and found himself getting excited again at the idea.

Damn, he really was messed up.

- X -

The next day found James in the grounds with Remus, who had taken a lazy Saturday off from his usual regime of study, study, study. James was sitting uncomfortably, every press of his ass into the ground making him wince, and every time the cloth of his underwear moved over his raw skin he had to clamp down on a rush of arousal that flew through him. The night before had found James in Severus' work-room, and the Slytherin had done a thorough job of making sure James was never going to forget how much he had enjoyed being spanked. Severus had taken him harshly from behind, his hips snapping into his red-raw ass with each thrust, drawing another orgasm from the Gryffindor not twenty minutes after his last. Now he was basically unable to do anything without being reminded of just how good it had felt to have Severus fucking him after he had been punished.

He and Remus were sat against a large tree near the lake, and the werewolf was throwing stones into it in an attempt to coerce some of the magical creatures that lived there to the surface. James could take a guess that his friends lethargic mood had something to do with why he and Sirius hadn't been talking for the last few days, but didn't want to bring it up and spark an argument.

Remus had been rather testy since he stopped speaking to the eldest Black brother.

It occurred to James, as he watched Regulus make his way out of the castle and head towards them, that maybe Remus had spoken to Sirius about his relationship with his younger brother, but then James didn't think Remus would still be alive had he done so.

Regulus made it to them and stood awkwardly in their presence. He tapped his foot on the ground and folded his arms as if waiting for something and James smirked at the cute, childish behaviour.

"We were supposed to meet in the library – I've been looking for you." Regulus accused, staring at Remus with stormy grey eyes. Remus looked up, brow furrowed guiltily, and then looked back at the lake.

"Sorry." He ground out, not even looking at his boyfriend. James frowned at him, but chose to say nothing. Maybe he wasn't welcome on their conversation, should he leave?

He went to stand but Remus pulled his arm, dragging him back to the ground. He hit the grass with a wince as pain shot up through his abused backside.

Regulus frowned, and then sat down with them. James hadn't really spoken to Regulus much since the incident with Hargreaves where the picture of their summer activities had come out, but the boy seemed a little awkward around him.

"Are we okay?" He asked Remus, "You've barely spoken to me since Wednesday!"

Remus glanced once more at his young boyfriend, and James didn't miss the guilty look in his friends eyes. It seemed the werewolf hadn't been speaking to either of the Black siblings since Wednesday, and James had no idea why that would be, but he did know that Remus didn't want him to leave – so he'd stay.

He quickly glanced around at the grounds and saw that Sirius was being dragged to their little group by Lily. She looked as amazing as ever, with her long red hair pulled back in a pony-tail, wearing a green tartan skirt that fell to her knees and a cream jumper. Sirius was watching her with something akin to awe as she pulled him by the hand over to them, but as he grew closer James saw he had a look in his eyes that mirrored the guilt in Remus'.

Seriously, what the hell was going on?

"Hey everyone!" Lily greeted, plopping herself down on the grass and folding her skirt neatly under her. Sirius sat down next to her with much less grace, spreading his legs out in front of him and tilting his head back to get some sun on his face. Regulus looked awkward at the new additions to the party, and Remus was watching Sirius with a frown. James watched him sniff the air deliberately, and rose an eyebrow at the werewolf's over-sensitive nose. He glanced around at the two couples, suddenly felt like a fifth wheel, and wished Severus was there as well. For the first time in a long time each marauder was actually in a serious relationship; but Remus was hiding his, and James couldn't ever expect Severus to go on double-dates with his friends.

"Maybe I should go." James said at exactly the same time Regulus said:

"I will leave."

Sirius and Remus adopted almost identical panicked looks and began spluttering their protests for each of them to stay. James decided to stay with a confused look between his friends, and decided to attempt to get to the bottom of this later. He passed his glance over at Lily, who gave him a small shrug in reply. He was getting on with her much better now that he had no interest in her

romantically. Regulus also relented with a small harrumph, and they sat in an uneasy silence for a moment before Remus coughed awkwardly.

"If you could give one piece of advice to yourself from a year ago, what would it be?" He asked the group as a whole. James studied him carefully – a lot had changed in a year. This time the year before he was taking Severus' orders and hating every one of them, along with the man giving them to him. This time last year Lily and Sirius barely spoke, let alone were romantically involved. This time last year James had been convinced that Remus was pining after Sirius, and didn't know Regulus existed. He sighed. This time last year Pete would have been sat with them.

"Don't put aluminium foil in your mouth." Piped up Lily, granting her a short, shocked silence before her friends all burst into laughter. Lily shrugged. "I did it on a dare a few months ago, but I have a filling and I didn't know how much it would hurt!" She tried to explain, and then had to launch into an explanation about what a filling was to the pure-bloods around her, and then how biting on foil could react with the metal in the filling and basically create a battery in your mouth that discharged a few volts and gave you an electric shock. By the time she had finished Sirius was attempting to open her mouth so he could see the small silver amalgam at the back of her teeth, and Regulus was looking at her like he'd never heard of anything so barbaric. James decided to bring the attention back off of her so that Sirius didn't rip her jaws apart in his attempt to find her dental work; but what to say?

He thought about everything that had happened in the last year – how his relationship with Severus had changed, how he'd been made Quidditch Captain, how Hargreaves had attacked him. He thought about contracting Cinis in the first place, although that had technically happened over a year ago, and he thought about how hard he had worked to be able to eat properly again and get a faint hold on his emotions. He thought about how Lily had become a good friend, who seemed to know all their secrets and held each one privately and with respect, and how good she was at calming him down when he was angry. He thought about how Remus and Regulus had saved him when Hargreaves was overstepping the line, and how Sirius had stood up for his relationship with Severus, despite still not liking the Slytherin. He thought about how their group had grown in numbers, but still felt small and wrong without Pete there.

"Never take your friends for granted." He finally supplied, looking at his toes.

Sirius let go of Lily's face to look at him, and Remus and he shared a look – possibly the first time they had looked at each other since Wednesday.

"Yeah, I agree with that." Said Sirius, voice quieter and more sombre than usual. He glanced once more at Remus, frowning. "And never take advantage of them." He added, staring straight at the werewolf. Remus' nostrils flared, and James knew they were thinking about the incident when Sirius had sent Snape after Remus on a full-moon. Was that what was eating them up? Had they fought about it again, after all this time?

Remus clicked his tongue.

"How about, don't do the same stupid thing twice."

Wait, what? Had Sirius sent another person after Remus? James gulped, but calmed himself realising it had been weeks since the full-moon and they had only starting being annoyed at each other on Wednesday. Besides, if Sirius had done something that monumentally stupid, James would know.

Sirius glared at Remus, who stared right back with the same angry look. They looked like they were set to glare at each other for hours, but then Regulus spoke up.

"Don't try and pee when you're hard."

The splutters and coughs from Remus were more than enough to end the glaring contest he was having with Sirius, and he turned to the boy with an incredulous expression on his face, which almost identically matched Sirius'. James chuckled lightly as Regulus was subjected to questions from his older brother about just when exactly he had discovered the problem, and why was he getting hard in the first place, and the boy had to defend the fact that he was fourteen and like any teenage boy had been caught unaware b his dick taking control. James was way more focused on Remus, who was staring at the boy with a flush creeping up his neck, and he had to nudge the werewolf with his foot to distract him from his boyfriend, so it wasn't too obvious that Remus was pining for the boy.

Remus turned to him with a helpless look and James couldn't help but chuckle.

He had to hand it to the kid, his confession had definitely made the conversation much happier – but James got the impression Remus was going to be having some trouble with focusing for a little while.

Wager

Over a month slipped by uneventfully and things seemed to be settling into a rhythm. Remus and Sirius were still barely talking and were making every excuse in the book not to be left alone with each other, which shouldn't have been too difficult considering they both had partners, except they both seemed pretty intent on ignoring them as well. After one awful moment when it looked like they were going to use James as a human carrier pigeon and talk to each other through him, James had quickly decided to remove himself from the equation. It meant James had found himself much closer to Lily once more, when he jumped away from Remus and Sirius, and decided to join her study group one weekend, which she held with Mary McDonald and two Hufflepuff's named Bertha and Florence, in the library.

James had spent most of the group realising he needed extra help in Charms, and then reassuring Lily that Sirius was just being an idiot, there was no other girl, and he would come to his senses soon enough and stop ignoring her. He hadn't realised how insecure the girl was in her relationship, but had decided to berate Sirius about it if he didn't come to his senses before long. Then Florence had asked if he knew whether Hansel was interested in anyone, and James had said he didn't think so, and before he knew it word had spread that James was to be the gay-best-friend slash relationship advisor to every chick in the school. Since then he had spent most of his time answering questions about how men's brains worked to besotted young women; and then Freddy Prescott approached him.

James had always been a little wary of Freddy; they were friendly, and James had no issue with the guy, but he'd never quite moved past finding he and Remus making out in a supplies closet in their third year. Plus, Freddy was the most out-and-proud guy a school, who basically wore a Pride flag as a cape at the weekend and was always recruiting more people to embrace the pleasures of being openly gay. Which was in no way an issue, just it wasn't the type of guy that James was – he generally preferred to be more subtle. He hadn't put much thought into what openly dating Severus would result in, and that had turned out the whole Hargreaves situation. James wasn't in any hurry to repeat it.

He'd shot the boy's offer to run a gay men's singles night to the ground very quickly, but somehow ended up promising to attend the next meeting for the gay community within Hogwarts, and promising to attempt to get Severus to come along as well. James had left the encounter thinking Freddy was crazy for wanting Severus there, and knowing full well if he even brought it up Severus would laugh in his face.

It all boiled down to over a month passing without the usual distractions of his two best friends, and constant reminders of Severus – who was becoming increasingly busy with preparations for end of term exams, and the extra work he was doing on Wolf's Bane. The Christmas holidays were fast approaching, and James found himself sat in the common room, staring out the window at the snow that was piling up in the grounds.

He'd taken a perch on the window seat, and was attempting to ignore the stares he was receiving from the majority of the other Gryffindor's in the room. He knew why he was receiving them – the jumper he had decided to wear in order to keep the chill out was about as Slytherin as you could get – a deep green woollen round-neck with a big silver 'S' stitched to the front. James' mother had made it for Severus for his birthday back in January, the 'S' standing for Severus, but the boy had recently outgrown it, and so James had made it a habit of stealing the knitted warmth – mostly because every time he did it made Severus' smile. Now he was deep in thought about the last Christmas break they had shared together – how Severus had spent the holidays with them, how he

had ordered James to touch himself in the cave in Broadsands Bay, how it had sparked a whole different direction for Severus' orders to go, and how he had seemed to be genuinely delighted in sharing Christmas with everybody.

James was mostly focusing on the cave though, and Severus' black eyes staring at him as he palmed his dick. He thought about how embarrassed he'd been, and how Severus' had touched him and ghosted his fingers over his entrance and James had come hard against the rock. Then he thought about how little over a month ago he'd come against Severus' leg when he'd been spanked in the Quidditch Pitch. He could see the stands of the pitch from his perch in Gryffindor Tower and every time the team went out to practice he was reminded of the punishment he had received there. He'd never really thought of himself as particularly kinky before he started his relationship with Severus, but the more they did, the more James realised how much he craved being ordered about by the man, or praised when he did something well – the spanking had just been another form of that; first Severus showed James exactly how easy it was to manhandle him and hold power over him, and then he praised James for taking it so well.

James pouted when he realised that even with the very first order Severus had given him, to make a love potion, James had strived to do it to the best of his ability, and had been disappointed when he'd done such a poor job. Had that all been because he had subconsciously wished to please Severus? He'd done every order to the best he could, and never slacked off a task even if Severus would have no way of knowing whether he completed it or not.

Severus' words came back to him again – I have always belonged to you.

James was beginning to think the same was true for him. Had he always strived to get Severus' attention? Was his bullying seriously the equivalent of pulling a little girls pig-tails?

He sighed at the thought. He had been very deep in denial if that was the case. He had treated Severus appallingly and he couldn't try and justify it now. He had genuinely found Severus' repulsive, and now he couldn't get enough of him. Either Severus aged like a fine wine, or James had matured enough to realise that looks weren't everything; and all it took was contracting a terminal disease to do it.

Jinx jumped on to his lap and he stroked a hand through her long tabby fur fondly. He was feeling incredibly melancholy because of the cold weather and the lack of his two best friends, and seeing the tabby kitten made his heart clench painfully even as he revelled in her love and attention. He'd only asked for her because she was a cat. He had originally wanted an owl – he had had an owl before, and they were incredibly intelligent, useful animals, but when he was in the store, choosing a pet with his mother fussing about how he'd been made Quidditch Captain despite Cinis, Jinx; the non-magical tabby kitten, had stuck out to him.

Because she was a cat. And cat's catch mice.

He frowned. He really missed Wormtail. He was devastated that the boy had turned Death Eater, and didn't know what he would do if he ever actually saw the fourth Marauder again, but Pete had been a good friend, and always knew how to get them to stop fighting. James missed his witty comebacks and his ability to always have an excuse on hand, should they get caught playing a prank. He missed how awed he'd get watching James and Sirius play Quidditch, and how much he would gloat in Potions when Slughorn would begrudgingly tell him he'd done a good job.

James had spent a good portion of the summer holidays wishing he was just having a dream, or that Pete would show up on his door step with his signature cheeky grin and a 'Just kidding, in actual fact I was just spying on You-Know-Who and I got way too into character!'. But it never happened, and eventually James had had to admit that Pete wasn't coming back. So he got a cat. It

was the only symbolic thing he could think of to drive it home that Pete was not a Marauder any longer, and now every time he looked at her he was reminded of that fact.

"I cheated on Regulus."

James shifted his legs to make room for Remus on the window seat and the werewolf sat down. The seat was technically too small for both of them and they had to squish up somewhat, but neither of them really minded. The Quidditch Captain frowned at his friend's confession, which had been whispered the moment Remus had come to join him. He glanced over at Sirius, who was sitting with Lily by the fire, where Lily was doing most of the talking. Remus should probably have counted himself lucky Sirius didn't seem to hear him – because it was one thing to secretly be dating the boy's younger brother, but a whole different kettle of fish if he had hurt Regulus in any way.

"That was a stupid thing to do." He finally replied. "You don't want to be with him any more?"

Remus frowned.

"Of course I still want to be with him." He shot back. James shrugged, looking out the window and hugging Jinx closer to his chest, who mewled.

"Then why cheat on him?"

Remus sighed, and ran a hand through his sandy hair, staring out the window.

"It's complicated." He responded after a short while. "I heard you're supposed to be some relationship guru now, what should I do?"

James winced at the comment. The girls were really taking his advice on guys way too far – he was in the most dysfunctional relationship going, he didn't see why the female population of Hogwarts thought he was some sort of expert. He levelled his friend a thoughtful look.

"Why did you cheat on him?" He asked again. Remus sent him a short glare, but sighed.

"I was swept up in adrenaline and something... I don't know, it was almost instinctual... some base need took over me and I slept with someone else." He explained, and James watched as his tongue darted out to wet his lips and he glanced towards the fire place. Suddenly everything seemed to click in to place and he puffed out an agitated breath of air as the puzzle came together. Remus and Sirius weren't talking, and they were ignoring their partners, and now Remus said he cheated on Regulus? Well, damn...

"You love Regulus?" James asked, testing the waters. "He's not some sort of... replacement."

Remus glared at him with full force and James only realised how scary the look was when Jinx leapt off his lap with an affronted meow where he had been squeezing her too hard.

"I love him. That's not the complicated bit. I've been crushing on him for about a year now, I'm very happy in our relationship." The werewolf confessed. "He's not replacing anyone."

James bit his lip.

"Well, this other person you slept with, it was a one time thing, right? If neither of you are interested in taking that any further then just... don't do it again, move on from it and stop taking it out on Regulus because he's confused as to why you're ignoring him." He advised, and then blinked when he realised Remus had squirmed when James surmised it was a one time thing. "Wait, this

thing with Si – some other guy, it was just a one time thing, right?"

Remus shrugged.

"We slept together before, last year – we attempted to move on from it then and not mention it again but... like I said, something instinctual took over."

James re-evaluated his thoughts. There was no way in hell Sirius would have slept with Remus more than once. He could see the idiot doing it once, just to see what it was like or whatever, but Sirius was quite clearly not interested in guys, and there was no way either Sirius or Remus would have been able to keep that a secret from him for that amount of time... surely? Perhaps Remus was talking about someone else; it would make more sense, as James couldn't really see kind and studious Remus playing both the Black brothers.

"Maybe it's best if you just don't see that person then?" James suggested, but Remus shook his head. The werewolf didn't elaborate, and James decided not to push for more details. He shrugged. "Then get a hold of your instincts Moony, because if you really love Reg then you wouldn't cheat on him. I suggest you tell him what happened and get down on your knees to beg for his forgiveness."

Remus sent another look towards where Sirius and Lily were by the fire, and James realised he was only looking over there because Regulus was Sirius' younger brother, and there would be hell to pay if Sirius found out Remus had cheated on his darling little bro. That was definitely the reason.

"You're right." Remus said, and made to stand up – James assumed to go find Regulus and shower him in diamonds for being such an idiot and sleeping with someone else, but as he stood a certain seventh year ex-beater approached them.

"Nice jumper Potter, suits a traitor like you."

Remus growled.

"Hargreaves." He greeted coldly, stepping between the seventh year and James, who had stood up at the ex-beaters words. Hargreaves rolled his eyes.

"Calm down Lupin, I'm only here to ask Potter to step down as Quidditch Captain."

Sirius and Lily had crossed the common room in a flash the moment they saw Hargreaves with James, and the rest of the Gryffindor's were looking on with trepidation, having seen a few scenes like this since the school year began. James huffed.

"Why would I do that, Aidan?" He replied. "I told you before, I'm not giving Sev any information, and the team are happy with that. You're not even on the team any more, by your own choice, so leave me alone already." He added, feeling braver than he felt. He took comfort in the fact that they were in the common room, and surrounded by people – Hargreaves might throw a punch, on an insinuation, but he wouldn't touch James untowardly.

Hargreaves snorted.

"Can't very well have a Captain who can't fly though." He replied. James opened his mouth to protest, but Sirius beat him to it.

"James can fly, that was one blip! He's flown in every practice since, and could fly circles around you." He protested. James smiled at the encouraging words. Ever since Severus had basically told the team to keep his confidence up in their first practice, Sirius had been making it a point to tell

James on regular occurrences how good he was on a broom.

Hargreaves, however, just sneered.

"I doubt it. But fine, we'll have a race for Captain – an obstacle race to test both skill and speed." He suggested, as if he had just come up with the idea, but James got the impression they'd just been lead in to a trap, and a bombshell of self-doubt hit him in the chest. He wanted to say yes, but what if he didn't win? What if he had another blip and couldn't even get off the ground? He was just as well to hand the Captaincy over then and there.

He gulped.

"I... I don't need to prove myself to you." He replied. Hargreaves rose an eyebrow, and fished an envelope out of his pocket. He handed it to James with a smirk.

"Agree to the race, Potter." He commanded, and the tone sent a shiver down James' spine. He opened the envelope and shook out what was inside, but as soon as he looked at it he pushed it back in, paling considerably.

"How did you get this?" He asked. Hargreaves only continued to smirk.

"Stuck around after I left the pitch and watched the practice from the sidelines, but I saw everything. You know I've got copies and I will spread them about should you say no to this race."

James could feel humiliation coursing through him, and curls of anger in his stomach. The photo Hargreaves had produced this time had been developed magically, and showed James over Severus' lap, ass bare as Severus' spanked him, and the flushed look of arousal on James' face as he cried out was unmistakeable. What was worse was that Hargreaves had been there in person, and had witnessed everything, and taken photos. James felt dirty and violated at the thought. Something that should have been private between he and Severus had been witnessed and was now being used as blackmail. And Merlin knows what else Hargreaves was doing with the photos in private.

He wanted to curse Hargreaves and demand he give him every copy of the photo, but he also wanted to go and give Severus a piece of his mind for convincing him that they should do that in a public place. He had known at the time it was risky – and now he knew that they had been watched by a perverted, blackmailing ass-wipe.

"How do I know you wont just keep using this against me?" He asked, ignoring the questioning glances he was receiving from his friends and other Gryffindors. Hargreaves held out his hands like he was being gracious. He grabbed a cardboard box full of parchment a first year had been using for doing some homework, and shook out the paper. He then pulled out wads of more photographs from his robes and placed them in the box. James recognised some as the photos he had used to make out that James was a man-slut, and others he had the decency to turn down, but James had glanced at them long enough when they were being placed in to realise they were from the Quidditch Pitch, and hoped nobody else was looking too closely.

"I place these pictures in the box as symbolism of all the blackmail material I have on James Potter, and swear that should I loose the race, they, and all they symbolise, will burn to ashes." He stated. "Now Potter, you put in your wager."

James had seen this type of magic before: betting magic. You put your wager in the box and said the words, and the box would make sure you held your end of the deal. He nodded. This he could do. He pulled the captains badge from his robes and placed it in the box with the photos of himself.

"I place this badge in the box as symbolism of my claim to Captaincy, and swear that should I loose the race, it, and all it symbolises will belong to Aidan Hargreaves." He stated. Aidan placed the lid on the box and it glowed gold before sealing itself shut. No one would be able to open it until the race was over and victor was proclaimed.

James clutched the envelope with the blackmail in it close to his chest, this suddenly felt like a very bad idea.

Hargreaves smirked, looking around at the assembled crowd of Gryffindors.

"Great – I'll see you on the Pitch this Friday, before the holidays."

James bit his lip.

"F-Friday?" He asked. Hargreaves nodded, and Hansel stepped forward from the crowd.

"Friday's your potion day." He stated to James, like the Quidditch Captain would need reminding. James was always weaker on Friday's than any other day, but he also knew that Hargreaves could set any terms for this race, because he had all the blackmail he needed until James won. If James won.

He nodded.

"Friday. See you on the pitch."

Confessions of a Werewolf

Remus caught his fourth year Slytherin boyfriend coming out of his Herbology class the next day. It was the last class before lunch and the Slytherin's and Ravenclaws that shared the class together were all milling back to the castle, chatting amicably about what might be on the menu and clutching their stomachs. Remus had skipped the last ten minutes of his own History of Magic class in order to wait for Regulus outside the green-houses and catch the boy, which he would feel guilty about if it wasn't for the fact that Binns probably hadn't even noticed him stealing away from the classroom.

Regulus spotted him almost the moment he exited the green-house and waved away the boy he had been walking with in order for the two of them to have some alone time. He waited until the entire class was most of the way to the castle, all solely focused on their hunger, before he leant up to attempt to kiss the Gryffindor. Remus dodged it by turning his head to the side, as he would feel way too guilty for accepting the pleasure, given what he had come there to do.

He had been mostly avoiding Regulus ever since his idiot mistake to fuck the older Black, and he desperately wanted to take the kiss, but he also knew that once he had said what he had come to say there was a very real possibility that Regulus would not want to continue their relationship.

He gulped.

"I slept with someone, about a month ago. It was only once, and it meant nothing. I am so sorry." He gushed out quickly before he could lose his nerve. In hindsight it was neither subtle nor kind to Regulus to confess his crimes so straightforwardly, but if he hadn't said it then he didn't think he would confess at all.

Regulus frowned, the motion marring his otherwise blemish-free face.

"Excuse me?" He spoke, voice unsure. He looked up into Remus eyes and the werewolf fought the urge to look away.

Regulus Black was all big, storm-grey eyes and soft, poodle-curls. His skin was as white as ivory, his hair as black as coal and his lips as red as drawn blood, giving him a distinctly Snow-White appearance – except a hundred times more dangerous and self-aware. Remus knew from experience that Regulus' lips were usually a more subtle pink, and only got quite that red from being bruised – it was an unexpected but welcome discovery he had made from kissing the boy – but this time Regulus' lips had been bruised because Regulus himself was biting and chewing on them. Generally Regulus stood with the grace and confidence befitting of a Black, but now his shoulders were slightly hunched, and he crossed his arms defensively over his chest.

Remus hated that he was the one to change Regulus from a mostly happy-go-lucky, smiley kid, to someone who looked like they had been backed into a corner and needed to find an escape route. He knew what he had done had hurt the boy, and knowing that was even worse than thinking that Regulus might break up with him for it.

"I'm so sorry." Remus repeated, although he knew it would do very little to calm the boy in front of him.

"Who was it?" Regulus asked, and Remus could see almost every muscle in his body tensing. His tone of voice wasn't angry, but the glare in his eyes suggested he definitely was. Remus couldn't exactly blame the boy.

"It's not important. What's important is I'm sorry, and I will never do it again."

Regulus took a step backwards with a bitter laugh.

"It's important to me." Regulus replied. He bit his lower lip again, and Remus thought the urge to reach out and physically comfort him. It would be the last thing Regulus wanted right then.

He sighed.

"I'm so-"

"What, you're sorry? You said you slept with them a month ago and you've only just told me so you can't be that sorry!" Regulus interrupted, and Remus was heartbroken to hear a choke in his voice that suggested he was holding back tears. "Is this your way of telling me we're over?"

Remus clenched his fists at his sides, an outward representation at the pure anger he felt at himself for putting Regulus through this.

"That's not it Reg, I love you. I was just frustrated and horny and I made a stupid decision. What I did meant nothing to me."

Regulus huffed angrily, turning his body away from his partner.

"Why do people think that makes it better? If it meant nothing to you then why do it at all?" He asked, and then finally started letting the tears fall out of his eyes. "If you were sexually frustrated then you should have come to me, right?"

Remus faltered. He gulped and nodded his agreement.

"I should have spoken to you about how I was feeling, you're right. I can't excuse what I did and I shouldn't have done it." He supplied. Regulus wiped away the tears from his eyes.

"I wouldn't have slept with you." He responded, then laughed sadly at the look of confusion it alighted on Remus' face. He shrugged his shoulders. "If you had said you wanted to... it would be my first time. I don't think I would have said yes. I mean... not right away. I just ... I mean... Dammit, I get why you wouldn't have spoken to me about it."

Every word felt like a smack in the face to Remus. This beautiful, wonderful boy was giving him an out, and he didn't even come close to deserving one. Before he even knew what was happening he was on his knees, holding Regulus' hands in his own and fighting back tears of his own. He'd never been a crier; even when he'd been bitten as kid – he'd cried because it hurt, but as soon as the pain stopped they dried up. He never cried out of emotion, but damn he felt like crying now. He'd royally fucked up and Regulus deserved so much more.

"Regulus, no part of what I did was a reflection on our relationship or how I feel about you. I love you so much." He told him, and then repeated it about six more times because he honestly wasn't sure once was enough. Eventually he had to concede when Regulus all but hit him for his efforts.

"Stop being so embarrassing." The younger boy told him, quietly. "Merlin, we've only been going out a few months, hold off on the damn marriage proposals, old man." Remus looked up to see he was blushing slightly and looking away from him, like he didn't want to be seen in such a soppy situation. Remus noted he hadn't let go of his hands though.

"I will never be so stupid again. I get it if you want to break up."

Regulus bit his lip again, levelling Remus was a sad look, but eventually he shook his head.

"I don't know if I really forgive you just yet, and you're going to have to work damn hard to build up my trust in you again, but... I don't want to break up with you. Just... tell me who it was?"

Remus winced. He had really been hoping to avoid answering that question, but who was he to deny Regulus anything, when the boy was so kind and understanding of Remus' stupid, stupid mistake.

He sighed. Regulus was not going to be happy. He stood so that he could do a quick dodge should Regulus decide to take a swing at him. Again, Remus wouldn't blame him if he did, but he had seen Regulus swing a beater's bat and even with his werewolf strength he was worried about how much a hit from Regulus would hurt.

"It was Sirius."

A silence fell over the area, and Remus dully noted it was as if the wind had stopped blowing and the birds had stopped singing. Then Regulus nodded and said:

"Right."

The Slytherin turned on his heel and started heading towards the castle as a brisk pace.

"Wait, Regulus!" Remus called after him, "Are you angry? Are you breaking up with me? Where are you going?"

Regulus kept walking determinedly, and Remus was almost certain if he hadn't run to catch up with him then he wouldn't have heard the reply.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of my brother."

Remus stopped walking at the utterance. Well, shit.

-X-

Sirius Black never saw it coming. He was sat at the Gryffindor table in the great hall with James, half-heartedly picking at his lunch and going over their strategy for the obstacle race the next day – because James was incredibly nervous about it and the way to deal with nerves was just to be ridiculously prepared, when Regulus entered the hall and made a bee-line for him.

"Oh hey Reg-" He said upon looking up, but wasn't able to complete the sentence because the next thing he knew a fist had connected with his face.

He went reeling backwards, caught himself on the table and used it to propel him back up, only to be hit again full force. He didn't attempt the same manoeuvre again, figuring it was probably safer to stay down, but that theory was thrown out the window when Regulus dove after him, crashing both their bodies to the floor, and straddled his brother so that he could repeatedly hit him.

"What the fuck?" Sirius finally shouted, catching his brother's hands in an attempt to stop the attack. Regulus was obviously far too angry to be hindered by something so small though, and instead brought down his head and head-butted his older brother. Sirius swore loudly, and went to buck the boy off him, (and possibly extract some revenge) when there was a loud, terrifying shout.

"That is enough!"

Both boys stopped their attacks and turned with identical terrified expressions to Professor McGonagall.

"You will get off your brother and explain yourself this instance, Mr Black." She snapped, glaring at Regulus, but Sirius winced at her words nonetheless. Regulus rose to his feet, glaring down at Sirius, who was wondering whether it was safe to follow suit. Eventually he decided it was and as he got to his feet he saw James wince. Damn, looked like Regulus had beat the crap out of him again – how long would it be before he lived this one down?

Regulus looked like he was about to give McGonagall some sass, which even Sirius had to think was brave, when Remus burst into the hall and skidded to stop in front of their little scene.

"Fuck, Sirius, are you okay?" He asked, and McGonagall attempted to tell him to leave the situation alone at the same time Regulus huffed loudly and said:

"I thought it meant nothing to you?"

Remus sighed, levelling the younger boy a glare.

"Merlin Regulus, he's a friend and you damn well know it – just because your upset doesn't meant you can go around beating the shit out of people." He huffed back. "If you feel the need to cause some pain then you should be attacking me."

Regulus clenched his fists menacingly.

"Don't tempt me Lupin." He replied, and Remus winced at the words. It looked as if McGonagall was going to attempt to assert some authority again, so Regulus turned on his heel and ran back out of the hall, through the entrance hall and back out into the grounds. All three marauders shared a quick look and then followed him.

McGonagall sighed, but figured if they were going to fight she would rather them do it outside, and left it at that.

Sirius caught up with his brother outside and grabbed his arm, spinning him around, only to be met with the sight of tears streaming down Regulus' face. Sirius honestly couldn't figure out how his brother could go from bulldozer to cry-baby in two seconds flat, but decided the mystery he wanted answers to more immediately was why his brother had attacked him in the first place.

"Wanna explain why you-"

"Why can't you just let me have one thing?" Regulus shouted, interrupting Sirius as he attempted to get out his question. He shoved the boy's chest, mainly to dislodge the grip Sirius had on his arm, and then was yelling more. "Do you have any idea what it's like to be your little brother? I'm never Regulus, I'm always Sirius' little brother. You're the cool Gryffindor brother who plays pranks and gets all the girls. Even when I became a Beater my own team just thought I was following in your footsteps. Even at home I'm living in your shadow and making up for your mistakes. You're the one who decided to leave the family and make me the heir, I didn't ask for it – but I forgave you for it. I forgave you for the mental health issues you caused our mother even though that was the reason I became... what I am. I forgave you for everything, but I can't forgive you for this."

Sirius frowned.

"I don't know what I've done." He admitted, and Regulus hit him again – but it wasn't hard this time.

"You slept with my boyfriend!"

Sirius coughed and spluttered at the same time Remus squeaked pathetically and James, by the sidelines, rose his eyebrows in shock.

"I what now?" Sirius asked, but Regulus rolled his eyes.

"Remus, you idiot. I genuinely had something I thought was just mine – something I didn't have to share with you. And you slept with him before I could even..." He trailed off, blushing slightly.

"Before I was ready to."

There was a very pregnant pause at the last confession, in which Sirius ping-ponged his shocked stare between Regulus and Remus, before finally he let go of the breath he was holding and seemed to deflate.

"Wait... that young boyfriend you told me about... that was Regulus?" He asked Remus, who nodded, grimacing. Sirius glared. "How long have you two been seeing each other?" he asked, voice raising dramatically.

Regulus huffed.

"We've basically been dating since September, but you'll be happy to know I just broke up with him."

Remus winced again. Sirius clenched his fists, turning to his brother with what was probably supposed to be a concerned expression.

"This is why I didn't want you dating – he hurt you."

Regulus punched him, on the shoulder, and there was enough force behind it to send Sirius stumbling backwards.

"You both hurt me, you dumbass! If you knew he was with someone then you shouldn't have fucked him!" He cried, and then turned away to run from them. In his wake he left the three Marauders in silence.

Sirius glared at Remus, Remus glared at the ground, and James was still reeling from what he had just witnessed. It occurred to him that their little group was getting really damn complicated. Finally, Sirius spoke.

"You lied to me."

Remus shrugged.

"I highly doubted I was going to get your blessing." He replied, and his tone seemed cross. He scuffed his shoe against the floor and watched as frost melted against the leather.

Sirius crossed his arms.

"Of course I wouldn't give you my blessing. He's my brother! Not to mention we... our history." He shot a glance at James as he said this and the Chaser gave a sort of half-smile, half-surrender-gesture.

"I already know you two slept together last year, and a month ago." He supplied, making the older Black flush lightly.

"Great, is there anyone you haven't told?" He shot at Remus. The werewolf huffed.

"I never mentioned your name." He replied. "What does it matter whether I lied to you or not now? Thanks to our stupid mistake he'll probably never talk to me again so you get what you want in the end."

Sirius may have gone on to say something else, to continue their argument more, but Remus rolled his eyes and stalked back into the castle. Sirius went to follow, but James pulled him back with a hand on his shoulder.

"You two need some time apart after that." He explained, then grinned cheekily. "Besides, I have so many questions. And so many gay jokes to make."

Sirius glared at him even as his cheeks coloured comically.

"Do I need to remind you that you're currently bedding a bloke?"

James laughed good naturedly. He may have been going on to tease his friend more when he paused, a serious and confused expression planting itself on his face.

"Do you think there's something going on in our friendship circle? Like, did Moony's gayness rub off on us after years of sleeping in the same room as him?"

Sirius snorted, although secretly he didn't think it was a bad theory – he had slept with Remus the first time mostly out of curiosity.

"I'm pretty sure you were always poufter, Prongs." He replied. He expected James to glare or jump to his own defence, but the Quidditch Captain just shrugged, still looking faintly curious.

He crossed his arms after a moment and levelled Sirius with a look that was much wiser than James was known for.

"Either way, how do you really feel about Remus? I mean, once I could put down as you being way too curious for your own good, but twice? Especially when you've got a girl as pretty as Lily basically throwing herself at you..."

Sirius huffed at this, and the two of them watched as students began trickling out of the grand doors of the castle, having evidently finished their lunch and looking to get a bit of air before heading to their next class. James watched as the eldest Black rubbed subconsciously at his neck, before he answered the question.

"I like Lily a lot – way more than I've ever liked anyone. She's fantastic, you know?" He began. James nodded along earnestly, and Sirius figured he probably did know just how amazing the red-head was, having crushed on her for years. "I don't feel anything like that for Remus. I never even thought about him, or any guy, in that way. It's just... I was trying to – uh – you know, with Lily... and something happened that was really weird but meant that basically we weren't getting anywhere and just..." He trailed off, rubbing at his neck with more force and grimacing at the ground. James rose one eyebrow expectantly.

"You are attracted to Lily though?" He questioned, and Sirius nodded feverishly.

"Of course I am. I don't know what happened but one minute we were getting hot and heavy, and the next I was in a lot of pain and nothing turned me off more than the idea of having sex with her. It was awkward and weird and I think she was okay with it, but then Remus was there and some stuff had happened that morning that reminded me of what we had done last year, and..." He

paused, and crossed his arms over his chest, looking anywhere but at James. "I don't know how to explain it, but there was this weird, instinctual need to... hand myself over to him."

James puffed out a long breath of air at the confession and watched as it crystallised in front of him in the cold air before turning to his friend. It had taken a lot of courage to tell him that and although he really wanted to tease the boy to hell, he also admitted it was not the time. He gave the boy a once over, but then stopped when Sirius went once more to rub at his neck. He caught the boy's hand mid-air and leant in close to survey his friend's neck.

Sirius gasped.

"What are you doing?" He all but squeaked out as James got impossibly closer, his nose almost brushing against his friend in his attempt to see. The light wasn't right and he was blind at the best of times, but he was almost certain...

"You said this all happened when you were getting it on with Lily, right? And that you were in pain? What happened to cause you pain?" He questioned. Sirius squirmed slightly under his scrutiny but answered nonetheless.

"She was... I guess she was... well she was licking and biting at about where your nose is now – can you please get off me?" He replied, and James pulled his head back, and let go of his friend's hand sheepishly. He'd spotted what he needed to find anyway. It was faint, but it was definitely there. Sirius huffed. "What the hell was that all about?"

James almost laughed, the whole situation seemed ludicrous.

"You're screwed." He replied, but at Sirius' glare decided to explain a little more. "The reason you can't get it up for Lily, and the reason you have the need to let Remus have his way with you are one and the same."

Sirius growled.

"If you're insinuating I have some sort of repressed feelings for Moony then-"

"I'm saying that the first time you and he did it, he marked you." James interrupted before Sirius could lead them off track. "You're his mate."

Conversations in Bathrooms

You're his mate.

Sirius hand instantly jumped back to his neck at his friends explanation, pressing two fingers against that spot. He knew exactly where it was; he had been sensitive there for months and often found himself rubbing at it when he was feeling anxious. Remus had sucked a bruise there their first time, and it had stayed raw and purple for almost a week after, but it was just a run of the mill love-bite, not a mating mark. Remus would never be so stupid as to leave a mating mark on anyone, especially not Sirius.

Besides, you had to be in love to leave a mark.

"You're mistaken." He finally replied to his friend, holding eye-contact, even though all he wanted to do was curl up in a hole and hibernate until this all went away. It was bad enough that James knew he had slept with Remus, twice, but now the Chaser was telling him that Remus had marked him? That couldn't be true.

"I'm not." James replied. "It's bad light to see it in but its definitely there."

Sirius huffed, crossing his arms, and started making his way back to the castle. James quickly fell into step with him. They both had Transfiguration next anyway, and they would be late if they spent much longer outside. Sirius was holding one hand over his neck, covering an entire side, as if maybe if he covered it the mark would disappear. Before they could reach their class Sirius made a detour into the boy bathroom nearby, and James followed him in without hesitation.

Sirius was craning his neck to one side to try and get a good look at where he knew the mark would be, but was glaring at his inability to get a good angle in the mirror to see.

"That could be anything, a freckle!" Sirius said, still trying to twist his body to see better. James shrugged, trying to go for calming but firm when he next spoke.

"Maybe, but it could be a mark. I'm pretty certain most freckles aren't that big."

Sirius sighed.

"Then it's just the remains of a normal bruise. I mean, Remus did give me a love-bite there, but it was a normal one – he didn't even break skin, I'm sure of it. This is just the remains of that."

James rose an eyebrow, crossing his arms across his chest and leaning against the sinks to better survey his friend, who was getting into a bit of a panic.

"Over a month later?" He questioned, and watched as Sirius pouted. James ran a hand through his

hair distractedly. "The best thing to do would be to ask Moony."

Sirius went very pale at the idea, and he was hardly tanned to begin with. He shook his head, but as he did the door opened and Remus entered the room. He took a moment to survey the scene before bypassing them and heading to one of the stalls. Once the door was closed behind him James made a face at Sirius that he hoped would convey that he should talk to the werewolf, and Sirius made a face back that he hoped would show that was the least likely thing for him to do. Their silent conversation went on for a moment, with many hand gestures and glares, and then Remus came back out of the stall and Sirius was forced to move to one side so that the sandy-haired teen could access the sinks for washing his hands.

"You're going to be late for class." He told them as he dried them on his cloak. He went to move passed them and get out of the bathroom, but James rolled his eyes and said;

"Sirius has something which could be a bruise but could be a mating mark on his neck – did you mark him?"

Remus glared at him.

"Of course not, I think I have more self-control than..." He glanced towards Sirius, trailing off, and in seconds had crossed the room and crowded the eldest Black against the sinks. Sirius put his hands on the werewolf's chest and attempted to push him away, but he could barely even budge Remus if the boy didn't allow him to. Remus used his hands to hold the boy still, one on the sinks behind him to keep the boy trapped, and the other had roughly grabbed Sirius' chin and turned it to the side so that he could survey his neck properly.

Sirius whimpered slightly at the rough treatment and Remus almost lost all self-control, but he took a deep, steadying breath, and let his eyes roam over the bared flesh. There, about half way down under his right ear, was a faded brown patch against Sirius' pale skin. He brought his other hand up and swiped his thumb over the discolouration, shivering when he realised the skin was slightly raised, and Sirius' breath had hitched at the touch. He leant in ever so slightly closer, and gulped; within the light brown was an ever so slightly darker brown discolouration – which quite clearly spelt R.J.L.

Fuck.

It definitely looked good enough to bite. Lick. Suck. Graze. Just touch in any way would be great...

No wait, maybe he was just panicking and seeing things. Maybe it was a trick of the light and his initials were not branded on to the neck of his fellow marauder.

"It might be a mark." He finally said, sighing. If he had done this, then Sirius deserved to know. The other boy made a pained noise in the back of his throat and Remus had the strange urge to reach out and pull him into an embrace. As such, he stepped backwards and cleared his throat noisily.

"What do you mean, it could be a mark?" Sirius asked when he was done. "Surely you would recognise something you made!"

Remus flinched at the accusatory tone, but otherwise didn't allow it to get to him. He shrugged.

"It's very faint, it's hard to tell." He explained. "I mean... there is a sure-fire way to find out..."

James, who had so far been watching their exchange with a mix of confusion and mild amusement, decided it was time to step things forward. They needed to find out if it definitely was a mark if

they had any plans of finding a way to get rid of it.

"So do that then." He pushed. Remus glanced at him, and then back to Sirius, who shrugged his shoulders, and sighed. Remus took it as consent, and promptly tilted the boy's head to the side so he could get better access, and sucked the offending mark into his mouth.

The reaction was instantaneous – Sirius moaned loudly and wantonly, his knees buckled, forcing Remus to catch him, and a storm of lust and need fell from his in waves, crashing over Remus in wafts of sweet, submissive scent, and making the werewolf exercise every ounce of self-control he had to detach himself from the older Black sibling. He quickly made sure Sirius could actually stand, and then took a few steps backwards. Sirius was blushing furiously at his reaction, James was trying to crush down his nervous laughter at what he had just witnessed, and Remus sighed.

"Its definitely a mark."

Sirius spun round to look at himself in the mirror and gasped at what he saw.

"What the fuck did you do?" He all but screamed, pressing a finger against the spot he had been trying to search for before, but which now was a much more medium brown, with the letters RJJ printed clearly in slightly raised black. It was about an inch and a half across, and incredibly obvious on his pale neck – like a mix between a tattoo and a branding.

Remus shrugged.

"We needed to make sure it was a mating-symbol, so I channelled the inner wolf and pushed a lot of possessive aggression directly into the mark, knowing that if you were my mate, my want for everyone to know who you belong to would make the mark clearer." He explained. "Obviously there were side effects, the mark is now much more obvious and wont return to being faint... and of course your reaction was due to how much aggression I was putting into the mark – any bitch would be affected by that. It's caused by your - urm... need to be dominated by your mate. I'm going to stop talking now..." Remus trailed off at his friends death-glare.

Sirius almost hit the roof, debating whether it was better to swing at Remus for his utter lack of tact, or just find a hole to crawl into a give up. He hated the times when Remus or James would refer to him as a bitch – they all did it to each other jokingly, and they all had bitchy habits, but Sirius was especially sensitive to it due to his animagus form being a dog, he felt like it was a specific dig. Not to mention it just bought home that he was, apparently, Remus' bitch.

James had snorted gently at the werewolf's explanation, but quickly held up his hands in surrender when Sirius glared at him.

"I'm surprised you recognised a mating symbol when it was that faint." Remus told Sirius after a moment, but Sirius shook his head.

"I didn't. I've had this sensitivity thing on my neck since last year but I figured it was just a nervous habit. Prongs spotted it." He responded. Then frowned. "Wait, if you marked me months ago, why has it only just started giving off these weird affects?"

James shrugged into the conversation to answer.

"Because you and Lily tried to get it on and your body made it very clear that it didn't appreciate you trying to cheat on your mate – which I assume is why you and Moony got carried away on your 'instincts' to fuck." He explained.

Sirius cringed. Remus hummed thoughtfully.

"And the bond has been getting stronger recently, I suppose because I was giving all of my attention to Regulus, which meant less time with you, the mating bond had to find ways to get us to get back together." He added. "I noticed a little while back that I had hit on an Alpha tone, but thought it was... I dunno, a late blooming puberty thing or something."

Sirius blinked.

"What's an alpha tone?"

"It's a tone of voice used by dominant 'alpha' males, that members of their pack can't refuse, or well, they can if they really try, but they rarely want to because an alpha generally only uses it to keep their pack from danger."

Once again the explanation came from James, and Remus turned to look at him with a confused, albeit fairly pleased expression.

"That's right." He agreed. "I assumed I had only hit on that tone because I thought of Sirius as part of the pack, but I'd never done it before... I suppose it was a reaction to the bond, telling me Sirius was my mate and I should treat him as such."

Sirius frowned.

"I don't remember you doing that." He confessed. Remus shrugged.

"I told you to drop a subject, you did. It was cute. You called me sir." He supplied before he could stop himself. Sirius huffed in an annoyed way, and turned to look at anywhere but his two friends. This was the worst possible development, and there were still so many questions to ask.

He pressed a couple of fingers into the mark on his neck gently and watched as Remus followed the movement. The werewolf's tongue darted out to wet his lips and there was a pulse through his jugular and into his blood-stream that left him panting. Remus' eyes were on him, and they looked almost feral...

"This is affecting you." Sirius stated, putting his whole hand over the mark. Remus nodded solemnly.

"I'm sorry. I know its not an ideal situation but... seeing you marked like that is... appealing to the wolf in me." He explained. "It's just instincts."

"I can tell because of the mark... this thing is literally telling me that you're horny." Sirius shot back. "How the hell do we get rid of it?"

Remus grimaced, and shook his head.

"I don't know." He offered. They looked around the room as if the boys toilets would give them answers, but all that happened was that they saw James watching them closely.

"How would you even mark me anyway... I thought in order for that to happen we had to... like, love each other or something." Sirius asked the werewolf, but Remus bit his lip and couldn't immediately answer.

James coughed.

"That's a common misconception. When making a mark the person marking needs to be thinking about love, that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to love the person you're marking. And, of

course, the bitch has no say – because that's fair." He explained, voice dripping in sarcasm at the end. "Seems like a stupid flaw in the system to me, but hey, werewolves are weird."

Sirius winced once again at the 'bitch' word, but said nothing. Remus clicked his tongue.

"Okay, you seem oddly knowledgeable about werewolves..." he stated, giving James a confused look. The Chaser twitched his mouth into a short smile.

"Yeah, well... I've been keeping it a secret because to be honest the creation is going really slowly and we're not sure if it will even work, and I didn't want to get your hopes up or anything... Severus has been working on a potion for some time now that he is hoping will quell the affects of a werewolf's transformation and make them harmless during the full moon." James watched as Remus become more and more on edge at his explanation, and held up his hands in a pacifying way. "I was freaked out when he first told me about it, but he started the potion to help werewolves, and to stop You-Know-Who from using werewolves in the war that's coming. He sold it to me by telling me he hopes the affects will also make the full moon less painful for you. And since that time we've been working on it together – which results in a lot of research on werewolves. I would say Severus knows more about werewolves than even you... oh."

Remus rose an eyebrow, but Sirius seemed to come to the same conclusion as James at the same time, and resolutely shook his head.

"Hell no. I am not telling your boyfriend about this and I am forbidding you to talk about it to him." He hissed. "I would rather live with this my whole life than let him think of me as Remus' ..." He trailed off, flushing and crossing his arms over his chest defensively. Remus frowned, the urge to tug Sirius into an embrace making itself known again. He'd been fairly certain he was annoyed with Sirius before he entered the bathroom, but with the development of the mark, things had done a one-eighty.

It still wasn't an excuse, but it made Remus feel slightly better about their affair a month ago. He could at least blame the attraction to Sirius on the mating bond.

"He might be your only hope." Remus finally said. "I don't exactly revel in this either, but Snape knows I'm a werewolf, and, well... as far as I know, mating-bonds are for life. I can only hope Severus *does* know something I don't."

Sirius stared at him for a moment before burying his head in his hands. For life? He couldn't really live with this his whole life, he was already going mad just feeling the attraction from Remus, and he couldn't very well continue being Lily's boyfriend if every time she broached the subject of sex his body made it a point of telling him he should be doing that with Remus instead. But could he really face telling Snape that not only had he allowed Remus to fuck him, he'd also allowed Remus to make him his bitch? And could he face having to depend on Severus to get them out of the fuck-up they'd fallen in to?

He sighed.

"Fine. But just... let me have the Christmas break to do my own research before we go to him." He bargained. Remus nodded his consent and James shrugged.

"Okay. Christmas break for your own research. I won't say anything to him. We are definitely going to be late for McGonagall's class though, and you need a concealer charm for your neck."

Sirius clamped a hand down over the mark once more – life was looking very complicated all of a sudden.

The Rightful Quidditch Captain

James paced the pitch the next day, watching the sun setting behind the stands, dressed in his Quidditch robes and attempting to quell the fear and nerves inside him. The rest of the team had shown up, but James couldn't tell whether that was in support of him or Aidan, and he was beginning to worry. Remus sat in the stands next to the Severus, and was stealing glances at Lily, who sat on the Slytherin's other side. A few seventh years were sat a couple of rows back from them in support of Aidan, and James had to push down another wave of nausea on seeing them.

He had managed to distract himself well enough the day before, with Regulus' anger at Sirius, and then the development that Remus had left a mating mark on Sirius – they had spent most of the previous afternoon and evening trying concealer charms to cover the mark, but it had resolutely shone through everything, and Sirius had eventually dug through his trunk and pulled out a dark grey turtle-neck to cover the mark. He was wearing it now, stood a couple of metres off from James, inspecting the events that Hargreaves had set up.

Aidan had rigged the entire pitch into an intricate obstacle course which would test James' skills in all areas of the game. They would start at opposite ends of the pitch, defending their respective hoops against a charmed Quaffle that would throw itself at them ten times, each Quaffle let in was a second penalty on to their end time, and Aidan had found a spare so they could each do the task at the same time. After completing the first task they would move closer to the centre of the pitch where they would have to swoop down to collect the Quaffle, return to the 'throw-zone' and attempt to get their Quaffles into the hoops – this time defended by a charmed broom-stick; again they had ten attempts and each Quaffle missed was a second penalty, so they had to be accurate and speedy. The third task was a straight fly around the pitch, except they would be targeted by Bludgers, and if the black canon-balls hit them, they they would incur penalty, so they would have to be fly intricately as they weren't going to be armed with bats. The fourth and final task was a straight race. Aidan had hitched up two rings they needed to fly through – the first fifty feet in the air, and the second about a foot from the ground. The fastest way would be to nose-dive from the high-hoop to the second and pull up at the last minute to tumble through it – but it was also the most dangerous way.

Aidan clearly had the advantage – he had set up the course and would know it much better than James. James had taken his pain-killer that morning, but it was late and he was already beginning to feel dizzy again, and he was beginning to regret making the bet. He shivered at the thought – on the other hand, he couldn't allow that photo to get out, and if he could win this race then Aidan would have to leave him be once and for all.

He tapped his broom on the ground and found himself inwardly bargaining with it. Just fly, just for today, and I promise I'll let you retire he told it, and looked up as Sirius came his way.

"It all seems legit... I'll keep an eye on him from the stands to make sure he's not cheating or anything."

James nodded, puffing out air, and Sirius clapped him on the back with a small smile and headed to the stands where he sat down next to Lily in James' row of friends. He watched as Lily placed a hand on Sirius' knee and he gently shrugged it off with an awkward smile. The rest of the team were sat behind them and James waved as Mark, Jenny and Damien pulled out a banner wishing him good luck and Hansel gave him two thumbs up. Even Hyacinth seemed to be on his side, despite her protests about his choice of lover. She was sat behind Severus now, and by the twist of his body and the frown on his face James could only assume she was attempting to engage him in

conversation.

He had to do it, he had to win this race – for the team that had come to support him, and believed in him.

He mounted his broom, took a deep, steadying breath in which he closed his eyes for a moment, and then on the sound of the clanger, which signalled the start of the race, he kicked off.

He could have jumped for joy for the fact that he'd actually managed to get off the ground, but focused on the task at hand. He raised steadily in front of his hoops, and glanced to the other side of the pitch, where Aidan had done the same. His Quaffle raised by itself in front of him in the throw-zone, seemed to hover for a moment, and then sped at him with force, slightly to the left. He dove after it and managed to graze his fingertips against it, but it sped past him and through the hoop.

Damn it.

Within seconds it was back to the throw-zone, and speeding at him again – this time to the right. James followed its movements and this time managed to get himself in front of it, bashing it away with his forearm. The slap it made against his skin was loud and painful, and momentarily reminded James of why he was doing this race to begin with, but he couldn't dwell on it for long because the Quaffle was back in the throw-zone and obviously deciding where to aim for next. James hovered for a moment where he had stopped in front of the right hoop, then decided it would be better to be more central and began racing towards the middle hoop – but as soon as he moved the Quaffle raced for the right hoop; James was going in completely the opposite direction and it went in without a hitch.

Fuck. That was two seconds he'd have to make up somehow – and the Quaffle was back in the throw-zone again.

He defended the next five Quaffles from the middle hoop with less problem, learning from his mistakes as he went and getting more confident with each goal he saved. Then, as the eighth Quaffle was lobbing itself at him a wave of nausea overcame him and he wobbled slightly on his broom, unable to control it for a moment, he seemed to hover still whilst the ball glided through the left hoop. He gripped on to his broom with both hands and tried to quell his sickness.

Shit. Three seconds seemed completely insurmountable to make up – he couldn't do this.

As he thought it his broom wobbled dangerously and dipped in the air. James gripped tighter and tried to stop himself from screaming – he was twenty feet up – he couldn't lose the ability to fly now! Panic shot through him, but then he heard a shout from the stands.

"James – fly to the left! That's an order!"

He had closed his eyes against the idea of plummeting to his death, but instinctively pulled his broom around to the left at the command, spiralling slightly at the force of his own pull and managed to get lucky in that his flailing broom had managed to hit the Quaffle with the tail-end and send it spinning away. He opened his eyes and sent a brief glance to the stands, where Severus was standing, with Hyacinth clapping him on the shoulder excitedly.

It was an odd thing to see, but the shout had definitely come from Severus – James would know his commanding voice anywhere – and who else would give him orders?

He swung his vision around, flying back to the centre of the hoops, feeling more confident now he

remembered he still had control over the broom, and sized up where the Quaffle would aim for next. It hovered in front of him, and then twitched to the right before beginning to zoom at him. He smirked – he had it. He was in front of the right hoop with time to spare, grabbed the Quaffle in both hands and threw it back to the throw-zone. It twitched towards the centre and again, he was there in plenty of time to catch the thing. He felt it go limp in his hands and carried it over to the throw-zone at top speed, looking up in time to see Aidan doing the same with his.

They met in the middle and turned around, like an old Western shoot-out.

"I see you let a few in there Potter." Hargreaves spoke the moment they were within ear-shot of each other. James couldn't reply – he had been far too focused on the task at hand to be watching how well Aidan was doing, and he was a little miffed that apparently Hargreaves hadn't been as caught up.

He watched as the broom stick that had been lying on the ground by the hoops raised to be in front of them, and hovered around them on it's end like the dusters from Beauty and the Beast, and looked for an opportunity, reminding himself he had to be quick. He spared less than a second to aim, and threw, diving after the ball the moment it had left his hand. He watched it go through the hoop with ease and drop down the other side, and swooped down to collect it, bringing it back to the drop zone.

He grinned as this pattern repeated again and again – this he could do. He was born to be a chaser. He'd been playing this game since as long as he could remember and he knew the feel, weight and air-resistance of a Quaffle better than he knew himself. An enchanted broom had nothing on his practises with Sally Wood, and at this point it wasn't even matching up to Hyacinth. He heard his team yelling and cheering incoherently as he got the tenth Quaffle in a row through the hoops, and this time he let it drop to the ground without diving for it.

He pulled his broom around to the side of the pitch to start the Bludger race and huffed slightly when he realised Aidan was hot on his tail. Where they had been back to back he couldn't tell if the boy had incurred penalties in his last task – but he knew that he would be good at this one. If James had been born a Chaser, then Aidan had been born a Beater. The guy was made of muscle, but flew like a freaking ballerina when he had to avoid the Bludgers. Neither of them had a bat, which was probably just as well because Aidan would have beaten James hands down in a contest of physical strength, but James also knew that Hargreaves' control over his broom was better than his at the best of times – and James was having to battle with his own insecurities telling him he couldn't fly.

He shot off around the pitch as fast as he could, trying to put some distance between himself and the seventh year, and instantly a Bludger was on him. He swerved out of the way and had to get back to the track quickly, loosing time the correct himself, and then continued on his way. At least he hadn't been -

Hit. He'd been hit.

His broom spiralled as a Bludger made contact with his arm. It grazed passed him – not a direct hit, but enough to hurt like hell. He had instinctively pulled on his broom handle and sent himself into a spin. He felt himself slipping from the seat and yelled an incoherent noise as he fell from the broom, shooting his uninjured arm out at the last second to hold on to the handle. He could hear concerned and angry yelling from the crowd, but couldn't focus on anything but the fact that Aidan had just flown past him.

Shit. He couldn't do a pull up even when he was as healthy as an ox. Now he had Cinis to contend with and was much weaker - he was going to lose!

He felt the pinprick of tears in the edge of his eyes and willed them back down, fingers clenching painfully against the wooden handle of his broom, he took a deep breath. He could wallow in self-pity later – he didn't have time for it now.

Besides, he could hear Severus in his own head telling him not to let Cinis consume him. If he wanted to play Quidditch professionally then he couldn't allow Hargreaves to beat him, he couldn't allow Cinis to beat him. He remembered the crushing feeling when he thought that Cinis had taken away his ability to fly, and the ecstasy he'd felt when Severus had convinced him that he could, and focused on that warm bubble of good thoughts. A surge of strength seemed to rush through him and before he knew it, he had swung himself back on to his broom. He sped forwards on the track, seeing Hargreaves a few tens of metres in front of him – he'd felt like he had been swaying there for ages, but it couldn't have been that long if Hargreaves was still in the race. A distance like that between them should have felt insurmountable, but James was suddenly confident that he could catch up – if not overtake.

He dodged the next few Bludgers coming his way with ease, finally feeling at home again on his broom, and caught up to Aidan just as the task was finishing. Both boys rushed for the ground and came to a stop in front of the marker. Aidan had maybe a quarter of a second on him, plus the penalty James got for getting hit. So as far as he knew he had at least four seconds to make up in their last race. They hit the ground and dismounted their brooms, both having agreed to taking a quick breather before the final task.

Going straight up, and then straight down – it was by far the most dangerous thing they had done – even more so than the Bludgers. The sun had set ages ago, and visibility was insanely low – James wasn't sure if he would be able to tell the difference between what was ground and what wasn't – which was never good when you were nose-diving straight for it.

"Last task Potter." Said Hargreaves as they both stared down the hoop markers. They would have to fly through them for it to count, but the hoops could only accommodate one of them at a time, so in order to win James would have to stay in front. Hargreaves was breathing heavily, which James took as a good sign – but then again, so was he.

"May the best man win." He replied, his good-sportsmanship having been drummed into him from an early age. He wished he knew how many penalties Hargreaves had incurred, because four seconds seemed pretty difficult to make up when the whole race should only take about ten. His arm was throbbing from where he had been hit by the Bludger, and he was physically and emotionally drained, but he could still hear the yells of encouragement from his team, and so he gripped his broom slightly tighter, and mounted it again. He felt hot all over and was worried about the time – he was once again cutting it fine for taking the Elixir, and had to wonder if Hargreaves had planned it so that he would miss his weekly deadline.

Aidan did the same, and as the clanger sounded, they both shot straight up into the air, towards the hoop they'd have to fly through fifty feet up.

James was the faster flyer – he knew he was. For about two seconds he was in the lead, and then Aidan overtook. He gripped his broom even tighter, ignoring the burn in his arm, and the fire in the rest of his body, and pushed his broom to go even faster. They were neck and neck as they neared the hoop, but Aidan was bigger and heavier, and budged James out of the way to get there first. With James' weakened state he was easily pushed to one side, and he huffed angrily at the turn of events, flying through the fifty-foot hoop moments after Hargreaves, and manhandling his broom around to that he could begin the descent.

As he began to fly down he realised that Hargreaves was flying down to the left, readying for the

swing into the hoop at the ground – a much safer way of approaching the end goal, and what James should be doing as well – but if he was ever going to make up four seconds on that guy, he would have to take the risk.

He angled his broom down and dived for the hoop.

His vision was blurry, his body ached all over and he had an incomparable heat in his stomach that was making him feel sick and angry. He couldn't tell what was ground and what was air, but he kept his eyes peeled on the hoop. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Hargreaves gaining on the hoop from the left, and a surge of anger overtook him at the idea that he might lose the race.

"No!" He yelled, at nothing in particular, but just because he needed to get out some of his frustrations and anger into the air. As the tip of his broom handle came level with the top of the hoop he pulled up sharply, swinging his body and broom around and tumbling through it backwards, hitting the ground in a painful smack and then rolling around his broom on the grass from the force of his collision with the pitch floor. He stared up at the stars for a second, dully registered that Hargreaves had swung through the hoop maybe two seconds after him, and then rolled over and heaved up his dinner.

"Oh, gross." Said someone at the same time as someone else yelled;

"Aguamenti!" And he was doused in water.

What the fuck? He thought, even as his mind was slipping into unconsciousness. He felt long bony fingers turning him round and ice-cold liquid being poured down his throat. Maybe thirty seconds later he managed to rouse himself enough to sit up. He found himself in Severus' arms, who was cradling him gently and breathing heavily like he was trying to stave off a panic attack, and as he looked around he saw his team arguing with Hargreaves. He was shivering slightly from the fact that he had, for some reason, been doused in water, and his hair and robes were dripping wet.

"You cheated ass-hole! That Bludger only hit him because you sent it at him!"

The person who had yelled it was Jenny, who, despite being a fairly petite third year, was apparently feisty and determined enough to go up against the seventh year ex-beater. Mark was having to physically hold her back, and James could see she was making every attempt to punch or kick Hargreaves.

"Nothing in the rules said I couldn't do that." Hargreaves said back, much more calmly, with a self-satisfied smirk on his features. Jenny snarled at him, but Hyacinth was the one to bring calm to the exchange. As she spoke, James and Severus made their way over.

"James made a time of a hundred and ninety-eight seconds, but he had a four second penalty so that's two hundred and two seconds over all." The Keeper explained. "Hargreaves made a time of exactly two-hundred seconds, but had a penalty of three so that's-"

Two hundred and three. Hargreaves had lost, by what was probably less than a second, but he'd lost. James fell to his knees and laughed in pure joy at the thought. Whether Hargreaves had cheated or not, James had won. He could feel that warm bubble of joy floating up inside him again and pulled Hyacinth into a hug at the news, picking her up and swinging her around in his pure ecstasy. She yelped but otherwise didn't protest, despite the fact that because James was dripping wet, the water was transferring to her, and James was too happy to care or worry – finally he was going to be free of Aidan's blackmail and this was the girl who had delivered the news.

Hargreaves grunted, and one of his seventh year friends joined them with their betting box. He

lifted the box and inside was James' Quidditch Captain badge, looking shiny and unharmed, and the ashes of the photos Hargreaves had placed inside. James placed his keeper back down on the floor, and fished out the envelope that he had stored inside his Quidditch robes and looked inside that to see a few ashes in there as well.

He breathed a sigh of relief.

He'd done it. He'd managed to rid the world of all of Hargreaves' horrid little pictures, and proved that he had every right to be the captain of his team. He swept up his badge from the box and revelled in the weight of it in his hand. Aidan huffed, crossing his arms, but didn't say anything. He and his friends dejectedly made his way from the pitch, and James turned to his team.

"Thanks for the support guys." He supplied, and was about to suggest they take the opportunity to celebrate back in Gryffindor tower, when Severus cleared his throat.

"I swear if you ever do anything so stupid again I -" He paused, and swallowed his words, his voice wavered slightly and James hitched in his breath at the sound. He didn't think he would ever get used to Severus showing emotions.

"Hey." He said, pulling on his boyfriends sleeve so they were a little off from the team, who diplomatically turned their backs and engaged in good-hearted banter with each other. He doubted Severus would want the whole team knowing he actually had feelings. His heart swelled at the idea that Severus was upset because he'd put himself in danger with that dive. "I know the nose-dive was stupid, but I'm still here."

Severus frowned.

"That didn't both me. I always have faith in your flying James." He confessed, making his partner grin at the praise. "What bothers me is that you agreed to this stupid bet to begin with, putting your livelihood on the line so that I would have no way of talking you out of it – and you two arranged it for a Friday! I know I said not to let Cinis consume you but that doesn't mean you should be stupid about it."

James frowned.

"But you were right there. It's fine. You got the Elixir to me."

Severus punched him lightly on the arm, but it was the arm he'd been hit with the Bludger, and it hurt a lot more than he thought Severus had intended.

"I was almost too late James. You were literally on fire."

James blanched.

"What?" How could that be? Surely he would have noticed if he had caught alight.

Severus nodded, and reached round the back of his neck to curl his long fingers into James' hair. It had become longer recently and was curling at the nape of his neck, but now James realised that there was a breeze on the back of his neck – and the ends of his hair were rough and frizzy where Severus was touching it. He pulled in a deep breath of air and didn't let it out again for a moment, trying to calm his thoughts.

It explained why someone had doused him in water... but in the past he had been close to missing the deadline and he had just fainted – now he had literally been on fire and didn't even notice it?

He brought a hand round the back of his own neck to feel the frizzled ends of his hair, curling his fingers through Severus'. He... he had almost died.

Complicated

Fleamont Potter had really outdone himself when it came to the Christmas decorations adorning the Potter cottage. Once more he had attempted to make it look like any other Muggle house for the holidays, and once more he had missed the brief entirely. There was a menagerie of coloured lights which flashed, twinkled and cascaded over the roof and windows, and two rattan and fairy-lights reindeer on the front lawn that were prancing around, attempting to play-wrestle each other. If anything else, the fact that their house was the only one on the street that was steadily being snowed on, was enough of a give-away that they were in no way a normal family.

Luckily, Godric's Hollow was a wizards only community.

The house had been magically enhanced on the inside as well. Last year they had attempted to squish three boys into the second bedroom; this year Severus had come back to spend the Christmas holidays with the Potters again, and with the development of his and James' relationship, the Potter's were less than happy to let them share a room again. The two boys had at first attempted to hide their relationship from James' parents, but James had let it slip in one of his letters to his mother, when she had asked for the fourth time if his crush was going anywhere. As such, Euphemia had written a week prior to Hogwarts to explain that they had magically enhanced the house upwards and created a third bedroom. The bedroom was to encompass the entirety of the new floor they had added to the top of their house, and would be shared by Severus and Sirius, as it was the bigger room.

Sirius had then wrangled Remus into staying the holidays with the Potters as well, in an attempt to get the werewolf to share the bedroom with the Slytherin, so he could stay with James in the second bedroom. The Potters had agreed, and so four boys ended up in Godric's Hollow at the beginning of the holidays. Of course, this had all happened before the development of Remus' secret relationship with Regulus, and the mating mark, so now they all felt a little awkward standing in front of the little cottage, trying to ignore the tension between Sirius and Remus. It was so much more complicated now than it had been a week ago when this had all been arranged.

Fleamont had picked them up from the station, but now Euphemia rushed out of the front door, swept James into a bone-crushing hug, then turned to Sirius and swept him up too. Once she was done with them she pulled Remus and Severus into their own embraces, and then ushered them all inside, until they were all crowded around the kitchen table and Fleamont had levitated all their cases into their respective rooms.

"So, what's the numbers then boys?" He asked as he returned to the kitchen. Sirius, wearing another turtle-neck, which he had borrowed from James, frowned at the table at the question, and he and James shared a brief look, before James sighed and confronted his father.

"I believe it's a zero for both of us, actually." He confessed. The reaction was comical; Euphemia grinned from ear to ear, whilst Fleamont all but gasped and started asking who they were and what they had done with his sons. Remus and Severus looked on confused, forcing them to explain the tradition, and then talk turned to other Christmas traditions and their plans for the holidays.

Soon they went to retire to their separate rooms, and James let Sirius into the their room first, before saying a goodbye for the evening to his Slytherin. He had been quite clingy with Severus since he had literally caught fire the night before, and had spent the previous night in Severus'

workroom, making the the most of being alive – now it felt like a step back to be told they needed to sleep in separate rooms.

He leant up and kissed the lanky boy slowly, revelling in how Severus' hands instantly came around to circle his hips and pull him closer to him. He sighed softly against his partners lips and attempted to deepen the kiss, only to be interrupted by an awkward cough.

James broke off to see his father standing at the top of the stairs, looking increasingly awkward. He rubbed at the back of his head for something to do, and James copied the action instinctively.

"My apologies." Severus stated, following it with a quick; "Goodnight."

The Slytherin turned on his heel, patted James' shoulder and walked up the new stairs leading up to the third floor to the house to join Remus in the new bedroom. James flushed slightly, trying not to look at his dad. Fleamont coughed again.

"You have always been so much like your mother." He stated.

James wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that – he'd always had a strained relationship with his dad, mainly because he couldn't get his head around Potions and Fleamont had made his fortune from creating Potions, and he couldn't deny that he had always been closer to his mother as a result, but he wasn't entirely sure that he took after her or anything. He supposed he looked a bit more like her, with his crazy hair and glasses – which were in strict contrast to his dad's slicked back hair and angular cheek-bones, which gave him a defined look. He finally caught eye-contact with Fleamont to see his dad had an amused twinkle in his eyes. He bit his lip.

"What do you mean?" He asked.

Fleamont grinned.

"She obviously had a thing for men with a skill for Potions as well!" He joked, pointing to himself. James took a moment to let his father's joke sink in, before he huffed embarrassedly. Fleamont ruffled his son's hair affectionately. "Honestly though, so long as you're happy."

James ducked from his father's attack, knocking the offending hand away. He wanted to yell and hide how happy he was, but he stopped himself, focusing instead on trying to keep the ridiculously happy smile from his face. He nodded gently.

"Yeah... I am." He admitted, scratching the back of his neck where his hair was singed. They quickly bid each other goodnight and James stole into his room, that he was sharing with Sirius. As he entered he noticed the other boy was stood in front of the mirror with his shirt off, trying once more to get a good look at the mark on his neck. It seemed even more obvious now, with the black letters spelling out Remus' initials on his pale skin. He turned to face James when he entered.

"I can't go to Broadsands this year." He said in way of greeting. James frowned, sitting on his bed.

"What? Why?" He asked. Sirius pointed to the mark angrily.

"I can't cover this thing without a jumper – I don't think swimming shorts is going to cut it!"

James sighed at the logic and nodded, it was getting really complicated.

"Yeah..." He agreed. He paused, and looked around the room as if he was thinking their options through, even though he had already decided on what he should say. The issue was going to be Sirius' reaction to it. "I mean... I know you said to wait until after the break but... we do have two

werewolf experts sleeping upstairs."

Sirius, as predicted, frowned heavily. He opened his mouth to say something but then seemed to re-evaluate what he was annoyed about and huffed.

"That's right... Snape's upstairs sleeping with my mate." He stated angrily, catching James off guard for a moment, so that it was a second after Sirius had stormed out of the room that James had caught up enough to go after him.

He quickly followed the boy up the stairs and watched bemusedly as he stormed through the door to see Remus and Severus both taking their shirts off, obviously in the process of getting ready for bed. Sirius seemed to wobble slightly at the sight of a shirtless Remus, but regained his resolve quickly and glared at the Slytherin.

He went to say something, but James quickly talked over him to stop anything embarrassing that might come out of his mouth, as it was now obvious to him the boy was being affected by his mark.

"Sorry to disturb, I think Sirius just forgot a hairbrush and was wondering if he could borrow one from you Remus, as I don't have one?" He lied, but before Remus could respond, Severus had turned to survey their little scene and was staring pointedly at Sirius' neck.

"Is that a mating mark?" He asked, then seemed to frown at himself as if he hadn't meant to ask. Sirius paused in his glaring for a second to stare at the Slytherin bewilderedly, before clamping a hand over his neck and flushing.

"No!" He lied, but even as he did Remus sighed and said;

"Yes."

Sirius glared at him.

"You can shut up." He hissed. Remus huffed back.

"He knows exactly what it is, and besides, you're the one that came storming up here shirtless, showing it off!" He replied, making Sirius cross his arms over his chest and pout slightly.

"You're the one that's sleeping with someone else!" He yelled back. A short silence followed the accusation, followed by Sirius whining slightly and balling his hands into his fists against his chest. "I just mean... for fucks sake. This thing is affecting me and I want it gone." He amended, looking off to one side embarrassedly.

Remus sighed, nodding along.

"I know." He responded, and then waved Severus over. He ushered Sirius towards him as well and the two of them studied the boy's neck, and the mark, with scrutiny. "I accidentally left it on him – do you know of any way it can be removed?" He asked the Slytherin. Severus, for his part, made no comments about why he should help them, or that they shouldn't have got themselves into a stupid situation, but took one look at James, who shrugged, and gently turned Sirius to one side to get a better look at the mark.

"What were you doing when you left it on him?" He asked Remus, but Sirius bit back the answer.

"What do you think we were doing, Snape?"

Again, Severus didn't react, beyond a small smirk. He stepped back slightly and found a sleep shirt to put on.

"Technically the answer should be no, it can't be removed." He started, once he was fully clothed again. "But I think I have heard of a case where it was removed... if memory serves though at least one of the mates died."

Sirius bit his lip at that.

"If you could think of something where neither of us dies, that would be more ideal." He replied. Severus smirked at him some more, but said nothing. He shrugged and then began rifling around in his trunk and the many books he had brought with him.

"Maybe it was in this one... or that one." He mumbled to himself as he searched, and then straightened and turned to the son of Black. He placed three of the books he had dragged out into the Beater's hands, and then shrugged. "Some Christmas reading for you. I believe the case is in one of those three books. If you find it we can see if we can replicate the conditions in a safer way." He explained.

Sirius clutched the book to his chest and stepped back with a chided expression on his face.

"Oh." He said, then flushed, "I mean, thanks... I guess."

Severus shrugged, and turned to James. He didn't say anything, but it struck James that he was looking for some reassurance. Severus wasn't exactly known for being the best as social situations, and now all four of them were in a room together without a topic of conversation.

"Thanks." James repeated, just because it was the first thing that came to his mind. Severus shrugged his shoulders slightly, not breaking eye contact with his lover, and frowned.

"I am not doing this out of some misplaced sense of comradeship." He stated, finally breaking his staring match with James and placing the outfit he had been wearing that day, now folded neatly, into his trunk at the end of his bed. "This development might be useful for my own research, that is all."

An awkward silence fell over the room at the words, and then Sirius shifted from foot to foot and scratched at the mark with one finger, shifting the books he had been leant to one hand in order to do so.

"I am sorry you know, about last year."

It was probably the worst thing he could have said at that moment. James knew why he had done it, and knew as well that Sirius had been looking for an opportunity to convey to Severus that he wasn't truly cold-blooded enough to send him off to die, but it sent a coolness over the room. Severus said nothing. He didn't look at Sirius or otherwise react in anyway, but James knew the incident still cut deep for everyone involved. Remus growled low in his throat, watching Sirius carefully.

This awkward tension was not exactly how James had planned to spend his Christmas holidays.

"We should go." He suggested, pulling on Sirius' forearm to spur him into action. The Black boy had obviously calmed down enough from the initial jealousy that had sent him storming up to the newest floor, and with one last glance at the angry occupants of the room he turned to leave with James. They had just made it to the door when James was literally ripped from his friend, pushed against the nearest wall.

"What the-" He started asking at the same time Severus gave an indignant yell with no particular words.

Once James had regained his bearings he could see Remus was seething gently, one hand firmly gripping Sirius' forearm in the same way James had been, and was basically shielding the son of Black with his body, from where he had thrown James away. Sirius was looking up at Remus with shock, but the werewolf seemed too angry to realise what he had done. Severus crossed the room and gave James a brief and discreet check over from where he had been thrown.

"Are you okay?" He asked once he was done, just in case he had missed something. James nodded mutely.

"Confused." He confessed. Severus rose his eyebrows and widened his eyes, looking off to one side. It was probably the funniest thing James had ever seen him do with his face, but he wasn't really in the mood to laugh. Instead he turned his attention back to their resident werewolf, who seemed to snap out of whatever anger had taken control of him, and had rushed to James.

"Damn, Prongs... I am so sorry." He apologised. "I just... I saw you leading Sirius away from me and..." He sighed, scrubbing at his face aggressively as if he could dislodge the anger issues he was experiencing. James nodded as he caught up.

"You reacted as a mate." He supplied. "Damn, this is complicated."

Remus nodded his agreement.

"I want this over with as much as anyone else. I swear, I'm not some Alpha-Jerk who does this kind of crap." He replied. Sirius padded across the floor and joined the group once more. He made an odd move with his arm as if he was going to clap Remus on the back, and then thought better of the physical contact and jerked it back to his side.

"I can stay up here tonight. It's... its less of a hassle when we're together." He said, explaining his reasoning, and then smirked at James and Severus. "You two can go downstairs and we'll promise not to tell Fleamont and Euphemia that we changed the sleeping arrangements." He added.

James bit his lip, glancing over at Severus. He couldn't deny the idea was tempting. He wasn't entirely sure it was a good idea to let Remus and Sirius, who were both obviously being affected by their mating bond, sleep in the same room, but the idea of being able to curl up with his own boyfriend for the night was overriding his sensible mind.

"You'll be okay?" He asked, though he barely looked at Sirius as he said it, and was practically already dragging Severus towards the stairs. Sirius just smirked.

"Be safe, kids." He mumbled as James pulled the door open and hurried Severus out. He waited for a moment to listen to the footsteps falling away and then turned to Remus. He caught eye-contact for a moment, and then he was wrestled to nearest bed, lips parting to allow Remus' tongue messily inside.

Fuck, this was complicated.

A Good Morning

The next day James awoke early and took a moment to appreciate the strong arms wrapped around him. They really had come a long way since James had caught Cinis. A year or so ago James would never have thought he would wake up snuggled against the chest of Severus Snape, and be elated at the idea. He stared at the boy's sleeping face for a moment, although without his glasses on the whole thing was out of focus, and thought about how they had argued so much, and how it had taken so long to get Severus to trust him, and how none of the happiness he was currently feeling would have happened if he hadn't become ill.

A feeling of guilt settled in his stomach for a moment. Severus had become an incredibly loving, and encouraging boyfriend. James was constantly being lead by him, in how to eat, how to control his emotions and how to deal with Cinis, and James would never forget that it was Severus that had given him the confidence to fly when he hadn't been able to. He often thought about what life would be like if he hadn't become ill, and he knew himself well enough to know that if he hadn't caught Cinis, he would probably still be bullying the amazing man in front of him.

Except, he had caught Cinis, and Snape had had his revenge, and James had completed each order to the best of his ability, and now he got to reap the rewards – mainly one Severus Snape, in his bed, cuddling him.

They were both naked, and James could feel the firm chest and smooth skin of his lover under the covers, and his fingers splayed over the man's stomach contentedly. Severus twitched and made a small noise of discontent at being woken, but James knew he had to get the boy back upstairs before his parents realised their rules had been broken.

"Good morning." He whispered, unable to stop the happy smile from forming on his face. They were so domestic. It was freaking amazing.

Severus frowned – which was not an uncommon expression for him, and blearily opened one eye to look at his lover. He surveyed James for a moment, taking in their state of undress, their cuddliness and how James was staring at him with a goofy smile plastered on his face, and then pulled up a hand from under the duvet and rested his long fingers on James' cheek. He caught eye-contact with the boy, opening his other eye, and breathed out slowly.

"You have bed hair." He told the Gryffindor. James huffed out a laugh, wondering whether he should point out that Severus' hair was much more ruffled than his was, or just let the comment slide. He reached behind himself and found his glasses on his bedside table, and slipped them on to his face to properly look at the Slytherin.

"We need to get you back upstairs." He explained, trying to stop himself from frowning. He just wanted to curl up in bed with him forever. It was cold outside the covers, and Severus was warm, and naked.

The Slytherin tilted his head to the side, and then quickly pulled it back again, shrugging his agreement, and tossed the covers off himself and stood from the bed in one fluid movement. James took a second to hungrily take in every detail of his boyfriend – as if he was once again seeing him naked for the first time. He drank in the dips and curves of the muscles on his stomach, the dark hairs on his forearms and the happy-trail leading down to his dick. He smiled at the pale skin and his lanky legs, and then pulled his eyes back up to the man's deep black eyes.

Severus was smirking at him, and then turned around and swooped his clothes from the floor,

giving James the perfect view of his ass. When he stood back up he had hooked his feet into his trousers and was pulling them up over his hips; going commando.

James found the thought oddly arousing, and quickly looked away, not wanting to get hard so easily.

Severus pulled on his top, and stuffed his underwear and socks into his pockets to take them back upstairs to his trunk. He padded out of the room bare-foot and was about to close the door behind him when he looked back at James, still in the bed, with the covers drawn up around him to try and conserve warmth. They caught eye-contact for a moment, and then Severus seemed to steel his courage, taking in a deep breath.

"It is." He said, then paused, causing James to shoot him a confused look. He took another breath and tried again. "It is a good morning... I have found that my best mornings are the ones when I wake up with you."

And with that he closed the door, and James listened to his padded footsteps walking away from the room, his mouth hanging open slightly in shock at the confession. His heart swelled pleasantly and he grinned at the closed door.

It was definitely only a matter of time before Severus told him that he loved him.

-X-

Severus padded up the stairs as quietly as possible, which only seemed to accentuate the ridiculously loud beating of his heart, which seemed to have taken up residence in his throat. He took a deep breath to attempt to calm it, wincing to himself as he replayed what he had said.

He hadn't been lying, he loved the morning he woke up wrapped around the Gryffindor. He would have never of thought it in the past, but waking up next to the warm, willing body of someone who loved him was an amazing feeling, and he was only human – he couldn't get enough of it. He wanted to wake up every morning in the same way, and had only attempted to convey that to James – but he feared it had come out in his usual style of awkward statements.

He sighed as he pushed open the door to the room he was supposed to have been sleeping in, and took a second to adjust to the sight in front of him.

It was a similar scene to the one he had just left downstairs. Remus and Sirius were both naked as the day they were born, curled up around one another on a single bed. The covers were screwed up; or thrown on the floor, Sirius' body was littered in bruises; one could only assume were love-bites, and the bed seemed to have actually moved a few inches over night.

Just. Holy fuck. They really had gone at it.

Severus had vaguely thought that the whole mating-mark thing was some elaborate Marauder-prank, and they would eventually turn round and shout 'psyche!' at him, but seeing the mess the two boys had made it was pretty obvious they were mates. Mates that didn't consciously want to be mates, but mates nonetheless, who needed to give in to their carnal needs.

If Severus had been the type, and if he actually had some inkling of affection for the two Gryffindors, he might even have teased them about the situation. As it was, he coughed a couple of times, effectively rousing Sirius, and politely turned his head to the side.

He heard the eldest Black curse and a crash as he attempted to remove himself from his partner and presumably fell out of bed, and then the boy collected his trousers from where they had been

thrown unceremoniously on the floor, and when he had pulled them on he stood in front of Severus, shirtless, and blushing slightly.

"That wasn't what it looked like." He tried. Severus rolled his eyes.

"I don't care." He told him.

Sirius stood in front of him, obviously awkward, and wanted to say something in his defence, despite the fact that Severus had told him he couldn't be less interested. The Gryffindor sighed.

"Look, could you maybe... not tell Jamie?"

Severus' ears perked up slightly – not at the request; he had almost been expecting that, but at the nickname. He had heard each of the marauders call James that in the past, and it had never bothered him, because to him, James had always been 'that wretched Potter'. James parents often called him Jamie too, and the more time Severus spent with him, the more he found himself interested in the nickname.

He had been dubbed 'Sev' by James, and he had memories of Alex Kemp calling him that as well. He'd never particularly liked the shortening of his name, but each time it had come from someone who he had grown close to. Severus could only assume those who called James 'Jamie' were those who were close to him – which would mean that Severus would also hold the right to call James that, right?

He wondered whether he should try it.

He shook his head at the boy in front of him, remembering that Sirius was waiting for a response.

"I honestly don't care what you do with your mate." He said again. Sirius frowned.

"It's not... It's not like that. I don't want to be his mate." He tried to explain. "He doesn't want this either. It was just a stupid mistake."

Severus figured he wasn't going to be able to get across to Black that he had no desire to discuss this, and then realised that maybe Sirius needed to voice out his feelings, or whatever. He sighed.

"Mistake or no, you're sex-life has very little to do with me, or James. I see no need to speak with him about it." He tried again.

Sirius seemed to breath a sigh of relief, and then cocked a little half-smile at him. Severus took a second to assess whether he had ever seen the boy willingly smile at him before.

"Last night was just... I dunno, the mark pushes us to do that crap." He tried to explain, making Severus clench his fists at his sides. How was Sirius not getting that Severus had no interest in the conversation? As it was, the Gryffindor carried on talking. "This mark is running through my veins like poison. I just want it gone already." He said.

Severus was lamenting in his head, trying to think of a way to ask Sirius to just leave already, so he could pretend he had slept in the new bedroom all night and then casually walk down to breakfast and ignore that this entire awkward conversation had ever happened, and then he caught up with that Sirius had said.

Wait a second... like poison?

"Holy shit." He breathed out, making Sirius stop mid-flow. The boy had once more been

attempting to excuse his and Remus' fucking, but now he looked at Snape with a raised eye-brown. Snape grinned back at him, and he watched in amusement at the expression made Sirius take two steps back.

"You okay?" Sirius asked. Severus doubted he was actually concerned for him, he probably just used it as a silence filler. The Slytherin nodded quickly, by-passing the other boy and picking up one of the books he had allowed Sirius to borrow the night before – flipping through the pages. When he found what he was looking for he smiled at the words.

"Here, they treat the mark like a poison as well – they tried to treat it with an antidote." He read. Sirius crossed the room to look over his shoulder.

"Oh, so we just need to get an antidote?" He asked. Severus shook his head.

"It didn't work. But here's the thing, it did shrink the mark a little. So although it was still there the mark itself was smaller and wasn't causing so much..." He trailed off, and then waved his hand between Sirius and where Remus was still snoring. Sirius obviously got the message, because he coloured slightly and nodded.

"Well that's a start." He muttered. Severus shook his head.

"You don't understand." He replied. "I think I just figured out how to make Wolfs-Bane happen. This is a massive break-through."

Sirius looked at him for a second.

"You mean the potion you're working on that's supposed to make werewolves harmless?" He asked. Severus nodded. Sirius glanced over at the sleeping werewolf and then back to Severus, who was now reading through the passage again excitedly.

As Sirius watched Severus looked towards him again and Sirius was taken aback by the sparkle and fire in his eyes. He'd never seen Severus as anything other than stoic, and for a split second he could see why James found him attractive.

Of course, as soon as he came to his senses he imagined himself gauging out his eyes and retching.

"Here." Severus said, picking up another book and handing it to Sirius. "Read through that one – the bit on removing marks will be about chapter twelve I think. I think we might actually be able to remove the mark."

Sirius took the book with no protests, and even found himself smiling back at the Slytherin. He glanced once more over at Remus who was snoring softly, and grinned at the idea that he wouldn't be getting controlled by the boy's initials on his neck any more. He nodded, flipping the book open.

Severus followed his gaze over to Remus.

"I'll be downstairs. Fill him in when he wakes." He said, moving towards the door. He got there and then turned around and pinned Sirius with a hard look.

"What?" Sirius asked after a moment.

Severus took a deep breath.

"As I am sure you are aware from James, I do not do anything for free." He stated. "I have a

condition that you will need to agree to before I remove that mark."

Sirius looked at him for a long moment, and then opened his mouth to say something, but Severus was already turning on his heel and down the stairs.

"What condition?" Sirius called after him, but Severus just waved over his shoulder.

"I will fill you and Lupin in together." He replied. "Meet me downstairs in ten minutes."

With that he padded back down the stairs. As he passed James' room he found the door open, and James fell out into the corridor and joined him on his walk downstairs. Severus turned to him with a grin and pulled him into a deep kiss.

"This really is a good morning." He told the boy. James nodded along willingly as they stumbled into the living room. Severus flopped down on the chair with his book and thought about how he was going to make Wolf's Bane become a reality.

All he had to do was to get Remus to agree to his condition.

Argument

By the time Sirius had managed to rouse Remus from his dead-to-the-world state, encouraged him into covering his naked body with some clothes (a process which may have taken wholly longer than necessary due in an impromptu make-out session the mark had goaded them into), and the two boys had made their way down the two flights of stairs to the Potter's living room, Severus was sitting on the edge of one of the sofas, leg jostling up and down excitedly. James was sat next to him on the sofa, his feet nestled underneath the Slytherin's thighs, and was looking at his boyfriend as if he had never seen the boy excited before.

Sirius had to wonder whether that was actually the case. Snape didn't exactly strike him as the fun-loving, adventure sort and Sirius could only imagine James would eventually find himself dreadfully bored with that kind of stiff, socially-awkward man as his lover. He reminded himself that Snape had promised he might have a way to remove the mark that was currently causing him to repeatedly cheat on his smoking hot girlfriend, and so wisely chose not to voice any concerns he might have over the Slytherin's ability to have fun. Instead he diligently sat down on the other sofa in the Potter's living space, levelling the man with a searching look.

He had said 'for a price' after all.

"Okay, we're all here." Sirius began. "Fill us in."

He'd had the undeniable urge to add a 'please' to the end of his sentence, but he'd never been quite that civil with Snape in the past, and he didn't really have the desire to start.

Severus looked between the two boys on the other sofa, linked by a mating mark neither of them wanted, and his eyes came to rest on Remus, who had sat down next to Sirius in a half-asleep state and was currently staring off into space, not paying attention to the conversation. Fleamont and Euphemia had woken early and gone for a walk, wisely choosing to give the four boys currently residing under their roof some time to be in each other's company without the prying eyes and ears of adults – but in lieu of their usual hospitality, Remus was without his morning coffee. He would need one if he wanted to be alert for the conversation to come – but Sirius didn't think he would be able to make it to the kitchen and make one for himself.

Feeling rather more domestic that he would care to admit, Sirius stood from his seat with a sigh.

"Sorry, just a minute." He mumbled towards Snape as he made his way from the living room.

He had to pass through the dining area, which adjoined to the living room by a wall that had obviously been taken out years prior, and turn to the right to get to the kitchen. Once there he grabbed the kettle off the stove and filled it from the tap. He turned the gas on the hob and watched the tiny flames burst into life on the ring, before placing the kettle on the heat. Then he found the largest mug he could find in the Potter's cupboards, and placed two spoonfuls of coffee and two spoonfuls of sugar in the cup. Strong and sweet, just how Remus liked it. He waited for a moment whilst the water boiled, and then, when the kettle was whistling nicely, and a steady stream of water-vapour was rising from the spout, he took the flowery oven glove Euphemia kept by the stove, and took the kettle off the heat – pouring the newly boiled water into Remus mug. He switched off the gas, stirred the coffee, and carefully carried it back through to the living room, placing it in Remus' hands.

"Here." He said as he did this, making sure the werewolf's hands were actually closed around the ceramic. He really was useless in the mornings, and Sirius wouldn't put it past the boy to drop it or

something. As it was, Remus looked between the mug and Sirius, smelling the sweet, strong scents, and smiled serenely.

"Thanks, Pup." He mumbled, although it was plenty loud enough for the couple on the other sofa to hear, and caused James to chuckle lightly.

Sirius flushed at the nickname – the affection causing his stomach to start doing back-flips, and he suddenly felt the overwhelming need to do anything to please his friend – his alpha. At the realisation of what he was thinking, he coughed awkwardly, sitting down heavily on the sofa next to his mate and turning his attention back to Snape – who had been watching their interaction with interest. When Severus realised Sirius was looking at him, he cleared his throat and began to talk.

"I believe I have a way to remove the mark." He filled everyone in, as Remus took a few tentative sips of his boiling hot coffee. Severus frowned, obviously trying to find a way to word whatever the next thing was that he wanted to say. He sighed. "I will help you remove it, but I wish for something in return."

Sirius, who had already heard this upstairs, said nothing; although his mind did unhelpfully conjure up images of some of the embarrassing tasks James had been forced into the year before, and he couldn't help but wonder if Severus would use this opportunity to extract more revenge on the Marauders. He glanced sideways to Remus to see how he would take the news, but the werewolf was just looking at Snape cautiously over the rim of his mug. So far, so good – he and Remus seemed to be in agreement that almost anything would be a worthwhile price for the removal of a mark that was taking away their free-will. So he was shocked when James was the one to offer protests.

"What?" All three boys turned to look at the Quidditch Captain, who had been contentedly curled up on the sofa with his feet squished under his boyfriend's thighs, but who now was closed in on himself and staring at Severus with an almost hurt look.

"You know I don't do anything for free." Severus told him.

James crossed his arms over his chest in a pose Sirius remembered his mother adopting any time she was particularly pissed off at his dad, and he had to wonder if Snape knew he was about five seconds away from James blowing up in his face.

"Orders?" James questioned, glaring. Severus rose one eyebrow at him, and then took a deep breath.

"No James, I know they are special to you." He said. Sirius suddenly felt the urge to look away, as James blushed and bit his lip in embarrassment. He didn't know what the situation was between those two, and for the most part he didn't care, but Snape was treading a thin line if he thought it was okay to just throw out something like that into conversation for them all to hear. James was obviously embarrassed by it. The Quidditch Captain huffed.

"Just do this as a favour to me." He cautioned. Snape narrowed his eyes.

"It isn't a favour to you." He replied. "Black and Lupin got themselves into this situation, and if they want my help getting out of it then they can make the choice on whether or not to accept my conditions." He explained, as if talking to a child. By the look on James' face, Sirius figured the Slytherin was about two seconds away from getting slapped. James opened his mouth to argue more, but Remus beat him to the punch, having downed half his coffee during the time the couple were having their little spat.

"Let's hear what this condition is, before we lose our shit over it." The Werewolf interrupted. His voice had come out calm and commanding in a way that made a pool of desire spring up at the bottom of Sirius' stomach. He decided at that moment he would pay pretty much anything if it meant he could look at his friend again and not feel the need to jump his bones. James seemed to lose some of his anger at the werewolf's words as well, and settled for glaring at his boyfriend, arms still crossed defensively over his chest, whilst Severus named the price for his cooperation.

"As you are aware I have been working on a Potion that's main purpose would be to negate the dangerous affects of a werewolf's transformation – making them harmless, even on a full moon." He explained. Sirius and Remus nodded along at his words. This much they knew. Severus continued on. "I believe I have made a breakthrough and now I want to take the Potion into the next stages and start human trials."

He looked directly at Remus as he said this and it suddenly became very clear exactly what the boy was after. Remus was the only werewolf they knew – if Snape ever wanted to complete Wolfsbane then he would need to trial it, and he would need a test subject. Sirius glanced across at his mate, who was currently engaged in a staring match with the Slytherin on the other sofa. Then James stood from his spot beside Severus, his hands clenched into fists at his sides, and shaking slightly.

"Wolfs-Bane isn't anywhere near trial stage!" He protested. "Just thinking you've had a breakthrough isn't enough. You could be putting Remus' life in danger if you test too soon."

Severus looked up and surveyed his boyfriend with something akin to endearment.

"I'm confident in the theory." He responded. This only served to make James huff, crossing his arms again.

"Confidence isn't enough. Test for the correct properties first!" He demanded.

Sirius watched as Severus stood as well, putting his hands out in front of him in what Sirius could only assume was meant to be a calming gesture.

"I understand your concerns James." The Slytherin soothed, and then he sighed. "I don't expect you to understand the ins and outs of crafting original potions, but-"

The boy was cut off when James let out an angry, sarcastic laugh and metaphorically hit the roof. Sirius could almost see the anger radiating off of his friend in waves. The comment Severus had made really had been stupid, and insensitive. It was almost as if the Slytherin wasn't aware of James' daddy-issues when it came to potion-making.

"How dare you!" James seethed, and there was a crack, followed by a tinkling sound which made Sirius look around into the adjoining dining space. The three large glass doors of Fleamont's potions display cabinet, which was in the dining area, seemed to have burst outwards and sprayed the table with tiny fragments of glass. James had to be really angry if he had lost control of his magic like that. Sirius wouldn't have wanted to be Snape at that moment – he was definitely in for a real tongue-lashing.

"James..." Severus tried to calm, but the Quidditch Captain was having none of it. He advanced on the Slytherin, making him back up a few steps.

"I don't understand the ins and outs of crafting original potions?" He asked, pointing at his own chest and voice rising dramatically. "Fuck you, you patronizing little shit! I've spent my whole life *living* in the ins and outs of potion crafting! Don't try and school me just because you had some

fancy fucking apprenticeship with an old hack-job nobody even remembers the name of!"

Severus dropped his peace keeping gesture and frowned at the attack on his mentor.

"Now wait a minute, there's a difference. Kindhall created a medically advanced Elixir – one that saves your life weekly, might I add." He responded. "That can't be compared to Fleamont's... *hair product!*"

James stamped his foot.

"It's a hair product that sells world wide. It's damn well more practical than some frozen nightmare made to combat a disease that nobody fucking gets!" He attacked.

Severus snorted.

"You have it!" He shouted back, then threw up his arms in defeat. "This isn't even the point -"

James was quick to interrupt.

"You're right, it's not the point. The point is you spent a couple of summers learning how to make one potion, and think you're all that. I've spent my entire *life* trying to live up to my dad – so don't tell me I don't know how to properly trial a new creation!" He seethed. Severus looked like he was going to argue more, so James started listing off the steps on his fingers to prove how adept he was in theory. "You test for the correct properties first; colour, viscosity, temperature and taste. If, and *only if*, all of those match within a suitable margin of your thesis, *then* you can trial the creation in lab conditions. In this case you would take hair and skin samples from Remus on a full moon, and use those samples to see how the potion reacts on contact. I mean I'm sure I don't have to tell you how *fucking* dangerous it is to get within *twenty feet* of him when he's transformed, but hey, please go ahead and yank some fur out whilst your risking your god-damn neck! Then, and again this is *only* if lab work goes to plan, *then* you can pour it down his fucking throat!"

He stopped and seethed for a moment more. Severus made a sound in his throat like he was going to say something, but James held up a hand for silence, and the Slytherin instantly obeyed.

"Even if all your tests go to plan there is still going to be the possibility that you cocked something up somewhere along the line, and you're still putting Remus' life in danger." He said in a much smaller voice. "I know what I'm doing Severus, so don't fucking tell me I don't." He added, just because he was still angry.

Severus seemed to physically deflate, now that James had lost some of his anger and was talking at a normal volume again. He held up his hands once more, but this time it was more in a surrender gesture than anything else.

"Of course I was going to go through those steps James." He explained. "I still need Remus to agree to give me those samples – because your right, it is dangerous and hopefully we can put some measures in place to make the acquiring of samples less so." He added.

James opened his mouth with a frown, ready to retaliate angrily again, but then stopped and sighed.

"So why don't you just ask him?" He asked. "Why go through the trouble of trying to blackmail him into it?"

There was a very pregnant pause in which Severus stared off with James, not saying anything to his own defence. After a moment James frowned and looked away, holding a hand over his eyes and biting on his lower lip.

"As I thought." He said, voice coming out suspiciously shaky. "You didn't think to ask because you still can't accept that maybe we're better people than you think! You... you haven't changed at all."

He may have been going on to say more, but he was stopped by one of Remus' firm hands on his shoulder. He looked up at the werewolf, who gave him a half smile.

"I'm happy to do it James. It's not a big deal." Remus told the Quidditch Captain.

James looked at his werewolf friend for a moment, his bottom lip beginning to wobbly dangerously in a way he wasn't proud of. He turned away and bit his lip to try and stop the shaking.

"It... it is a big deal." He protested weakly, before he promptly burst into tears.

The remaining Marauders and Severus watched, slack-jawed, as James went from shaky tears to great heaving sobs that raked his entire body. The boy brought up his hands to wipe at his cheeks and eyes, trying desperately to rid of the evidence of his tears, even as he cried noisily and urgently. He sniffled and sobbed and choked on the saliva he was gasping shaky breaths through, and then Fleamont and Euphemia arrived home, calling out from the hall, and James fled the room, running up the stairs and to his room before he could be spotted by his parents.

Two seconds later the adults entered the living room and surveyed the scene – three boys looking stunned, the broken glass in the adjoining dining area, and the sound of James' heart-wrenching sobs, which could be heard despite the distance the boy had tried to put between himself and them. Euphemia took a look around, shrugged off her coat and sighed.

"I'll go check on Jamie." She announced, making her way back out of the room and up the stairs.

Fleamont produced his wand and charmed the shattered glass back into the cabinet, fixing it in place as doors again.

"S-sorry, Mr Potter." Remus said, when the silence was stretching thin. He had been the last person to speak to James before the boy had burst into tears, and he wondered whether James' earth-shattering sobs were his fault.

Fleamont turned to them all with a smile.

"There's no need to worry boys – it's not the first time James had broken that cabinet and then burst into tears, and I doubt it will be the last." He explained. Over the last year or so of James having Cinis he had witnessed him lose control of his magic many a time, and it was always followed by a break-down.

"I've never seen him cry like that before." Sirius supplied. He wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. That wasn't the type of crying one did when they banged their head and their eyes couldn't help but water. It wasn't the type of crying one did when you were overtired and drunk. That was... heart-breaking, like a toddler who was in pain and just couldn't figure out why, and there was nothing you could do for them.

Fleamont frowned at the ceiling, where broken sobs were still coming from above.

"I'm sure this has been building up for a while, given the intensity of it. Well, I'm sure Euphemia will get to the bottom of it." He told the teens, and then tried to think of something to get their minds off his sons breakdown. "For now, let's see if we can figure out how I'm going to transport all four of you to Broadsands this year!" He suggested.

The three teens exchanged worried looks, glancing at the ceiling, but after a moment decided that

James' parents probably knew best, and began helping Fleamont plan for the annual trip to Broadsands Bay.

Arrival

James tried desperately to curb his sobbing as he heard a knock on his bedroom door. He held his breath for a second and then let it out shakily as another round of tears fell from his eyes. His whole body was shaking, his eyes were puffy and hurt, and his nose was running like a tap. He felt pathetic and was incredibly embarrassed that it had happened in front of his friends. Usually when he burst into tears like this he managed to find some place quiet to do it, but now all of his friends knew just how much of a cry-baby he could be.

He tried to snuffle down his cries as his door creaked open. He was stood in the middle of the room, having been too agitated to sit down, and he looked over at the door to see his mother stealing her way inside. She closed the door behind her and held out her arms, so he shuffled into her embrace.

"It's all okay now baby." She whispered, sending him into a fresh bout of sobs. She held him for a long time, humming gently at the back of her throat until finally he had calmed down enough that his gasping sobs had turned to sniffles. When he was ready the two of them moved so that they were sat on the edge of his bed. Then, Euphemia spoke softly so as not to make him jump. "So what happened?" She asked.

James shrugged his shoulders, wiping away the remaining wetness from his cheeks.

"Severus and I had a fight." He told her, and then frowned down at his lap. "I mean, I sort of just shouted at him a lot."

Euphemia smiled at her son. That sounded like her when she fought with Fleamont. He would make well-rounded points, and she would scream and every now and again throw the toaster at the wall.

"Severus is a strong man, I'm sure he can handle a raised voice Jamie." She reassured him. James nodded, rubbing at his still running nose with the back of his hand. He gulped down a lump in his throat and looked down at his lap, not yet confident enough to look his mother in the eyes.

"I... I think it's getting worse." He confessed.

Euphemia frowned. She knew exactly what her son was referring to – his illness, Flamouriadesis. She could still remember in excruciating detail the day he had come down with his first fever. How his temperature had risen to dangerous levels – enough for him to start fitting. She remembered the Healer explaining to them all about Cinis; what it would do if left unattended, and all the awful side-effects her son would have to live with for the rest of his life. Severus had become James' saviour, his confidant, and his lover, but even he couldn't shield James from the mood-swings and the pain, or the nightmares he suffered of burning up.

For awhile things had been picking up. James had become better at managing the symptoms – his appetite returned and he gained back some of his muscle, and he developed coping mechanisms for the moods. But keeping his feelings bottled up only lead to outbursts like this, and they were becoming more and more frequent. She'd lost track of the number of times they'd fixed Fleamont's potions cabinet by now – James seemed to target it when he was upset.

"Maybe you need to find a healthier way of dealing with the mood-swings." She suggested cautiously. Perhaps she ought to buy him a punching bag. James only shook his head dejectedly though.

"It's not just the moods." He confessed. "I feel sick all the time, and I'm sleeping through my classes because at night I wake up from nightmares. Just the other day Severus had to douse me in water... I... I actually caught fire, mum." He explained.

Euphemia fought down the urge to gasp and cuddle her only son to her. It wouldn't do James any good if he knew how worried that news made her.

"Have you told Severus?" She questioned. James shook his head.

"I'm sure he knows some of it." He explained. "I just... I'm scared."

Euphemia placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

"Scared that it's getting worse?" She tried to clarify. James shrugged.

"Yes, a bit." He replied. "But I suppose also... Severus already looks after me so much and so I'm... I'm also scared that I'm becoming too much of a hassle for him. It's not his job to do all this extra stuff, he's only supposed to make the Elixir."

Euphemia raised her eyebrows at her sons worries, even though James was looking at his lap and wouldn't see her expression.

"I don't think Severus would ever see you as a hassle." She told him. James huffed.

"You don't know him like I do." He challenged. "Sometimes he can be so loving and supportive, and other times it's like he hardly knows me at all."

Euphemia chewed thoughtfully on her tongue. She didn't like to think that they were having relationship issues – it would make it very awkward for the future, when James would still have to rely on the boy for the Elixir.

"And which one do you think is the real Severus?" She asked. She watched as James frowned in concentration.

"I honestly don't know." He confessed. Euphemia sighed.

"Well, that's not exactly what I want to hear about the man my son is sleeping with." She told him. James hummed low in his throat in agreement, and then his eyes grew wide and he hurriedly stood from the bed in a panic, blushing bright red.

"What do you mean? We're not sleeping together!" He lied.

Euphemia rolled her eyes.

"Please Jamie, your father and I are old – we're not deaf." She admonished. "Our room is only across the hall you know, I think I heard more than enough last night to wager that the two of you are sleeping together."

She tried not to be amused over her sons nervous and terrified look. Especially as he evidently thought back to what he had been up to the night before, and what noises he had been making, and blushed furiously.

"Shit." He said, and given the situation Euphemia figured she could probably let the swear slide. James ducked his head in embarrassment. "So does that mean... that dad..."

Euphemia almost laughed at her son's worry.

"Oh yes, he heard." She confessed. "I had to stop him from storming over to your room and making a scene. We only went on our walk this morning so that I could take some time to talk some sense into him."

James winced.

"S-sense?" He questioned. Euphemia smiled.

"Oh yes, I just had to remind him that it wasn't like we didn't do those things when we were your age." She explained. James wrinkled his nose at the idea of his parents getting it on, and this time Euphemia did laugh. Then she frowned. "Don't be surprised if he does want to talk with you at some point though." She warned.

James sighed, nodding his head.

It was going to be a long, difficult Christmas.

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A few minutes after this conversation took place, James and Euphemia made their way back downstairs. James had managed to get his sobbing under control, but there was the tell-tale red blotching around his eyes and across his cheeks that gave him away. They entered the living room to see the remaining three teens crowded around Fleamont, who was holding up a model replica of his Morris Marina and trying to transfigure it so it had more seats.

As they entered Severus looked up. He took stock of James' blotchy face, and the way his hands were still shaking. They caught eye-contact across the room and Severus saw all the hurt and upset in his boy's eyes. He knew now that his comment on James' knowledge or lack thereof of crafting potions had been ill-conceived, and the boy's shouted arguments had been more than enough proof that James obviously knew what he was doing. He regretted the comments – but what he regretted more was how he had handled the entire situation – from making a leap in Wolfs-Bane to attempting to blackmail Remus into cooperating, and that he had made James cry.

He took the four long strides across the room, to where James was standing in the doorway, and swept the Gryffindor into an embrace. One hand circled around his waist, and the other buried itself in his birds-nest hair, pulling his head up for he could capture his boyfriend in a searing kiss.

There was a cough of protest from the other side of the living room, which Severus figured was probably Fleamont, but could have just as easily have been Sirius. He ignored it in favour of drinking in every single detail of his lover. James' eyes had widened in shock at being kissed in front of an audience, but had quickly fluttered closed as he melted into the affection. His hands travelled up and took fistfuls of Severus' shirt, and he let out a breathy noise of pleasure that Severus had no doubt he would feverishly deny later if their audience picked him up on it.

He broke the kiss and pulled James' hands around so he could hold them in his own. James looked up at him with a slight frown, as if he wasn't sure if the PDA was enough for him to be forgiven. Severus knew that it wasn't.

"I have decided to help Black and Lupin, without the need of compensation." He told the boy he was holding on to, but he spoke loudly enough that the mated pair could still hear him from across the room. "I will ask Lupin for the samples I need, and if doesn't wish to provide them then I will find another way to advance the potion." He added.

James made a small, weak sound.

"Sever-" He began, but Severus shook his head, cutting the boy off before he could get side-tracked.

"I also want you to know that I am not doing this as a favour to you, or because you shouted at me." He said, although inwardly he admitted he had only come to this conclusion because he had been shouted at. He sighed at James' confused look. "I am doing this because you are right. I am always going to be bitter about how you and your friends treated me in the past – but you changed, and I think it's time I realised that Black and Lupin are capable of change as well. They are... they might be better people than I originally thought. And I'm sorry I didn't understand that sooner." He finished, trying to gauge James' face for a reaction. After a second he gave a small, unsure smile, and nodded.

Severus couldn't help himself – he cupped James' face in his hands and bought him in for another kiss – mindless of the roomful of occupants watching them.

There was another protesting cough.

"I think we've had more than enough public displays of affection for one day." Fleamont stated loudly, making James break from the kiss and blush furiously.

Not that Severus wasn't grateful for the kindness and hospitality that the Potter's had shown him since he came into their lives, but at that moment he solemnly wished that he lived alone with James, so that he might kiss and love the boy whenever he wanted.

He turned back to the conversation they had been having about how to transport the six of them of Broadsands Bay, and walked the length of the room to stand next to Remus, pulling James along by his hand as he was of yet unwilling to let go of his lover. When he got there, Remus smiled at him.

"I would have always given you the samples." He said under his breath. Severus had to stop himself from breathing a sigh of relief – if Remus really had said no, then production on Wolfs-Bane would have come to a stop. After all, how many werewolves could he reasonably expect to find? Especially ones that would willingly give them samples of their skin and fur.

He nodded back to the boy.

"I can't remove that mark until the next full moon." He replied. "Black will need to be thoroughly prepared before then."

He glanced across the room to the calendar that was hanging on the wall. The next full moon coincided with Boxing Day – five days away. He glanced over at Sirius, who was pointing out various points on the model car when the transfiguration needed improvement.

Hopefully five days would be enough time.

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The next day saw the boys up bright and early, their swimwear and towels packed into rucksacks, and stowed down by their feet as they crowded around the kitchen table to get some tea or coffee inside them. Sirius had opted for another turtle-neck, trying desperately to hide his mark until the last minute, and the other boys were in their own heavy-duty jumpers. It was colder outside than any year previously, and there was a general feeling amongst the teens that one of these years they would jump off the cliff and smack straight into ice.

"Everyone excited?" Fleamont asked as he entered the kitchen. The boys had all been talking under

their breaths about the ceremony Severus planned to execute on the next full-moon, and the potions Sirius would have to take every night before bed until then, and they stopped at he entered and gave him their best innocent smiles.

"You bet." Sirius said, when no one else was forthcoming with a response, and then the other boys all grumbled their half-hearted agreement.

Yesterday they had transfigured Fleamonts old Morris Marina into a people carrier, giving them some extra height and two extra seats in the boot. Fleamont had taken one look at it and added some roof-bars and a luggage box they could all store their rucksacks in, as well as the picnic Euphemia insisted on taking, despite the fact that nobody ever felt like eating once they had dragged their freezing cold body's from the depths of the bay.

Euphemia waltzed into the kitchen now, having been up for some time preparing extra food, blankets, towels and hot-chocolate for their trip – and also because she had been making some rather special arrangements.

"Sirius, darling." She said as she poured some hot water into her own mug of tea. Sirius glanced up from where he had been watching Remus drink coffee and stood, assuming she would want a hand lifting something. She smiled at him. "You told me so much about your girlfriend Lily that I simply had to invite her along today." She told him excitedly.

Sirius' jaw went slack, and he stared at the woman for a moment, and then glanced back at his mate.

"I... what?" He asked. Euphemia laughed.

"Oh yes, and your brother too. I know you said you had a fight, and that simply wont do. There's no better bonding then a jump into Broadsands!" She added, almost in a sing-song kind of way. At the mention that not only would Lily, but Sirius' little brother, be joining them on the trip, Remus stood from the table as well.

"Regulus?" He asked, at the same time Sirius spluttered.

"There was no need to invite my brother."

And Fleamont said:

"Wait, two more?"

Euphemia looked between the two boys and her husband cocked her head to the side with a smile.

"Lily will be here any minute and Orion said he was going to -"

She cut herself off as there was a commotion in the living room that sounded suspiciously like people flooding through the fireplace.

"Euphemia?" Called a deep, booming voice. Euphemia brushed her hands down her skirt.

"Well, that will be them now." She told the group. "We're in the kitchen Orion, come on through!"

A couple of seconds later saw Orion Black, dressed in a deep navy suit under matching robes enter the room, clutching a trilby in his one hand and holding a brown leather briefcase in the other. Next to him stood Regulus, wearing a white dress shirt with a grey jumper over the top, and black slacks. The Black idea of Muggle attire. Orion had his hand on his son's shoulder as he steered him

into the room, but he let go of it to shake hands.

"Fleamont." He greeted, clasping their hands together firmly. Then he turned to the man's wife. "Euphemia!"

Euphemia surged forwards to wrap the man in a quick hug and give fake air kisses to each other. Their respective children watched the scene with something akin to disgust. When the adults had all greeted each other Orion turned to his eldest son, and, surprisingly, held out his arms.

Even more surprisingly, Sirius shuffled into the hug.

"Hey daddy." He mumbled against his father's suit, unheeding of how much of a pretentious rich-kid he sounded. Orion allowed himself a small smile at the endearment his son had given him, and then held Sirius at arms length.

"Well, you're definitely growing." He assessed. Sirius rolled his eyes. Orion's expression softened. "We've missed you, kid."

Sirius nodded, rubbing at his nose self-consciously. He looked away and chewed on his tongue.

"I missed you too." He said, and in all honesty it wasn't a lie. He had missed his father, and his brother – it was his mother that he never wanted to see again. Orion was a decent enough man, as far as Black's went – he was just blinded by his love for Walburga and put her above everything else – which hadn't exactly lead to a happy childhood when his mother was the abusive one. Orion smiled at him now.

"You know you can always come home." He said. Sirius finally broke away from his fathers grip and took a couple of steps backwards.

"I'm not going back there." He said, crossing his arms. Orion held up his hands in surrender. He reached out and ruffled Sirius' hair, but did little more to try and convince him to return. He turned to Regulus and clapped a hand down on his shoulder.

"Now Regulus," He started. "Be good for the Potter's. Lord knows they've put up with enough from your brother – please show them that at least one of our sons learnt some manners, eh?"

Regulus stared at his father for a long time, not saying anything, and then shrugged his shoulders. Orion sighed, but turned to Fleamont and Euphemia, motioning for them to join him out of the kitchen for a private word. They followed him into the hall and swung the door shut behind them, leaving the teenagers to talk amongst themselves.

"What's up Orion?" Fleamont asked.

The Potters and the Blacks went way back in history, and had always been close. They never saw Walburga – the woman was almost a recluse, choosing to stay cooped up in their home in London, but they often saw Orion when their children were in school, and would give him news of Sirius – because the boy didn't send too many letters home, but would send letters to the Potters. Orion, like any father, worried about his first born, and relied on them for any news about how he was doing in school. It had only become worse since Sirius had decided to permanently move in with Fleamont and Euphemia, but Orion was glad that if his teenage son was going to run away from home, at least he had done so to a couple he knew and trusted. Now, Orion grimaced.

"I was hoping to ask you a favour." He stated, wary of how much the Potter's had already done for him. Instantly Fleamont and Euphemia nodded. Orion fiddled with the trilby in his hand nervously as he began to explain. "You know Walburga's not been well since Sirius decided to move in with

you. And of course we're grateful for everything you've done for him, but I need to let you know that she's getting worse. She doesn't leave the house – she barely eats, or washes. She's begun to call Regulus by Sirius' name and it's not good for him either." He explained.

Euphemia pursed her lips.

"I understand it's hard." She said, placing a comforting hand on her friend's arm. "But you know Sirius doesn't want to return there."

Orion nodded solemnly.

"And I'd never force him to. What I'm trying to say is that 'Burga hasn't exactly been a model mother, and I can see it's hurting Reg. I think she and Regulus need some time apart." He replied, sighing. "There's a sort of spa retreat I'd like to take her to, so she can get away from it all, maybe start to recuperate, and, well..."

He trailed off, but they all knew where he was going with it. Euphemia nodded kindly.

"Of course we can take Regulus in for a little while." She said. Orion smiled gratefully.

"It's just for a couple of nights." He assured them. "We'll be back before Christmas Eve." He added, passing his briefcase to Fleamont, which was full of things for Regulus, on the hope that they would agree.

Fleamont took it and nodded, bidding his friend goodbye, and wondering where on Earth Regulus was going to sleep.

- X -

"I didn't know you'd be here." Regulus mumbled, looking at his shoes, but obviously addressing Remus. The sandy-haired boy moved around the table to get closer to his ex, but Regulus just stepped backwards, glaring. He turned to Sirius. "I didn't want to come, but dad basically forced me." He added.

The elder black smiled weakly, but Regulus just rolled his eyes. Severus sent James a look, and the Quidditch Captain shrugged his shoulders.

"I'll fill you in later." He whispered under his breath, whilst Sirius, Regulus and Remus stared off with each other.

Before the silence could stretch to thin the Potter's arrived back in the kitchen.

"I think I saw Lily walking up the street just now, but time is getting on." Euphemia announced. "We'll meet her out front by the car." She said, rallying the boys into scooping up their rucksacks.

They made their way outside and Fleamont took all of their rucksacks and placed them in the overhead luggage box. A few seconds later Lily arrived, giving Sirius a quick hug whilst she yelled 'Surprise!'. The two of them grinned at each other for a minute, and Fleamont took her bag and placed it in the box as well, slamming it closed. He turned to the six teens, who had obviously realised there were seven seats and eight passengers, and were standing around awkwardly next to the car whilst Euphemia buckled herself into the front passenger seat. He sized them up.

"Okay, Lily and James, you'll be in the boot-seats I think." He started. As the slightest of the collective teens they would be the most comfortable in the smaller space. He pushed down one of the middle seats and watched them climb in a buckle themselves up. Then he turned back to the

group, pushing the middle seat back up. "Right... Severus on the left for me, Sirius in the middle, and Remus on the right." He ordered, watching them take their seats. Sirius was the shortest of those three, so hopefully with him sat in the middle he would still be able to see out the back window. Then he turned to Regulus, who was standing awkwardly, like the last one to be picked for a sport. Fleamont had left him until last because he was by far the smallest of his charges, and he needed someone smaller. "I'm afraid you'll have to sit on Remus' lap." He informed.

The boy looked at him with something akin to heartbreak, and instantly began to protest.

"Why does it have to be Remus?" He asked. Fleamont rose an eyebrow at him, and then looked over at Remus, who, out of all the teens, had by far the most muscle.

"He's the strongest, he can catch you if I have to break sharply or something." He explained. Regulus huffed, but then shrugged his shoulders, probably taking heed of his own father's words to be polite, and gently eased himself onto Remus' knees. The werewolf wrapped his arms around him.

"What are you doing?" Regulus seethed. Remus swallowed heavily.

"Getting comfy." He replied. "But also, you don't have a seat belt, I need to look after you."

Regulus huffed in annoyance, and he noted that oddly, so did Sirius. He glared at his brother, and then into space.

"I don't want to be here." He mumbled to himself, wondering if he could just get out of the car and find his way back home. But then Fleamont was in the front, and the car engine had roared into life, and their trip to Broadsands Bay had begun.

A Christmas Tradition

The wind at Broadsands was *cutting*. They pulled up into a small gravel car-park – the only car, and the only people around for miles, and began filling out of the newly transfigured people carrier. Regulus jumped out of the car like a shell ripping from the barrel of a shotgun, and stood awkwardly in the freezing air, wrapping his arms around himself, as the rest of the party exited at a more leisurely pace. He took the time to look around the area. It was a dull, grey day, and the cliff-top was partially obscured by the moist fog filling the air, but the area was probably nice in the summer. The grass lining the cliff-top was overgrown and the only flowers there were muted winter blooms, there was a small gravel path leading right up to the edge of the cliff, and a few small alcoves where the rest of the party were beginning to head.

"Come now, Lily, we'll dress over here." Euphemia smiled at the only other girl in their makeshift group. Regulus watched as the red-head's brow furrowed, and she lifted her shirt to show the nylon-spandex composite of her swimsuit underneath.

There was a splutter from behind him and Regulus glanced around to see James staring at Lily in shock, pushing his glasses up his nose, and mouth agape. He pointed at the girl, and then turned his face to Sirius and spluttered some more.

"How the hell have we never thought of doing that?" He yelled, making Sirius shrug his shoulders, also looking shocked. Regulus watched with trepidation as his older brother turned his gaze to him and said:

"*You* need to change, right?"

Regulus wanted to curse him. The boy was acting as if nothing had happened – as if Regulus hadn't had his heart broken just before they broke up for the Christmas break. Sirius was acting as if his sleeping with Remus, helping the sandy-haired Gryffindor cheat on Regulus, was no big deal, or simply inconsequential, and it made Regulus want to fire hexes at him. Instead, he got his revenge in a smaller, quieter way; by hooking his thumb in the waistband of his trousers and folding it down just far enough for his brother to see his swim-trunks, already worn under his clothes.

It really was common sense.

Sirius gaped and huffed, turning to James, and the two of them shared incredulous looks. Regulus turned to join with Lily, who was looking fairly awkward, like she hadn't expected her forward thinking to cause such grievance, and the two of them sat and waited while the rest of the party readied themselves.

Regulus watched them shuffle and shove their way behind the small alcove – the three remaining marauders and Severus shifting behind one, and Potter's parents choosing another – and tried to squish down the feelings of betrayal and anger. He reminded himself that he had broken up with Remus – that in a fit of anger he had shouted how he and Remus were no longer involved, and that meant he had no claim over the boy. He tried to tell himself that even if Remus was getting entirely naked in that alcove, in front of Sirius, a boy he had slept with, then that was none of his business. He tried to tell himself that even if Remus was continuing to help Sirius cheat on Lily, then that wasn't anything to do with him either. But it didn't stop the anger and upset bubbling up inside him.

He was a ball of anxiety and anger-issues by the time the four boys and Potter's parents had rejoined them, and they made their way to the cliff-edge. Regulus and Lily made their way after the rest of the party, giving each other confused looks. They all stopped at the edge and Regulus watched as Euphemia and Fleamont grabbed for each other's hands, and then James took his mother's hand, and Severus' on the other side. He watched with some amount of disbelief as Severus and Sirius then clasped hands as well, followed by Remus taking Sirius' and holding his out for Regulus.

Regulus wanted to be sick. This felt like some form of embodiment of the love triangle between them. Remus in the middle, with the Black brother's holding his hands on either side. He recoiled slightly, but then Remus rolled his eyes and grabbed his fingers, hauling him towards the cliff-edge. Instinctively, Regulus grabbed Lily's hand and pulled her along too, trying to focus on the warmth and smoothness of her fingers, rather than the rough callouses of Remus' hand.

He tried. He really tried to block out the memories of Remus' hands holding him, wrapping around his back or holding his hips as they stole kisses in the library or under the stands of the Quidditch pitch. He tried to forget how he would watch Remus flip through the heavy healer books he read, his fingers taught as he held the corner of the page. It was useless though, the feel of Remus' large, rough hand, enveloping his, had him feeling nauseous with grief for their relationship.

And he hated Sirius' even more for it.

He glanced around Remus' form, trying not to see the broad shoulders, the muscles rippling in his stomach or flexing in his arms, and looked to his older brother; the boy he had looked up to so much, who had stolen so much of him, and he just had time to think 'did Sirius get a tattoo?' when he was being dragged forwards, and before he knew it they were running over the cliff.

Lily let out a piercing scream beside him, which he was grateful for, because it masked his own yelp of surprise. What it couldn't mask was how tightly he held to Remus' hand as they fell. It couldn't mask the way Remus looked to him, catching eye-contact. It couldn't mask how Regulus seemed to melt when Remus cocked a small smirk and pulled him ever so slightly closer.

And then they hit the water.

He didn't know how to describe what he was going through, for the moment his body hit the waves, to the second his head hit the surface again. There was a moment of eerie calmness, and then he realised they'd obviously hit the water at the wrong part of the coast, because his back hit something hard and unrelenting, which took the air out of him. Sheer panic overtook him as he watched his held breath bubble up in front of him, and all the warmth seemed to drain from him. He felt himself let go of Lily's hand, and that caused a panic too – because the waves were feral and she was the last one in the link – she could be carried off to sea. She might have hit something too, and would drown. He shut his eyes and then couldn't open them again to see; he didn't have a wand to cast spells, and he was hopelessly cold. The only thing he could do was hold on tighter to the link he still had, and when he felt Remus' fingers slipping from his he managed to get his other hand around to grasp at him. He felt an arm wrap around him, and together they kicked to the surface, braking the waves and pulling in great gasps of air, one after another, kicking frantically.

"Calm down, both of you."

The voice that said it was decidedly deep, way deeper than any voice Regulus had thought was with them – but even so it still sounded like Remus, and he felt an odd sense of peacefulness wash over him. He stopped kicking.

"Good, now just float for a moment." Came the same deep voice that was somehow Remus, and

Regulus allowed himself to still, opening his eyes to see Remus was still holding him by the waist, and still had a hold of Sirius' hand as well, who was also floating. A shot of anger shot through him at the sight of his brother, but then Remus said: "Calm," and the peacefulness washed over him again.

Remus attempted to manoeuvre the three of them towards safety, but at that moment another large wave washed over them and crashed them into the cliff-face. Panic took hold again as Remus' fingers slipped from his waist, and he heard the older Gryffindor call:

"Don't let go!"

He scrambled for purchase, pushing himself away from the rough edge of the cliff, and grasped behind him, finding Sirius' hand and gripping it tightly, and then Remus was with them, pushing off with his feet against the cliff and wrapping one arm around his shoulders, pulling all three of them along the side of the face – shielding them when he could from the attack of the waves.

It took them some time to move themselves away from the immediately dangerous waves and to a small beach, and all of that time Regulus was only vaguely aware of the cool roughness of Remus' fingers on his skin, and the sense that he had to keep calm, and then they washed up on the stony sand and Remus let go of him for a second and all of the worry and panic came flooding back.

"Lily!" He shouted, turning wildly and running back into the sea. The freezing water was lapping at his knees, and he was covered in goosebumps, shaking violently, but even so he readied himself to dive back under the waves. He was about to, when Remus' hand wrapped around his waist and hoisted him back to the beach, despite his protests.

"She's fine." He heard, over his own shouts. "She's with James and Severus; they'll make sure she gets back to the shore."

He turned, and pointed into the distance, where Regulus could now see a shock of red hair, meeting with two figures, making their way towards the shoreline. He was dragged further backwards, and deposited on the sand next to his brother. He looked up just in time to see Remus fall to his knees, wrapping his arms around both of their necks and breathing deeply.

"You fucking idiots." He said under his breath, the insult coming out weak and obviously unmeant. For the first time since they had hit water he didn't sound oddly deep; he sounded just like Remus – but worried in a way he hadn't allowed himself to be when they were in the sea. Slowly, Regulus allowed himself to return the hug, and felt, more than saw, Sirius do the same.

"We're okay now." Sirius told him, voice gentle. Remus nodded, and Regulus could feel it against the side of his face. He allowed himself the privilege of short, slightly panicky breaths, and then attempted to get himself under control. He gently removed himself from Remus, standing on the beach and taking a few steps back from them.

He looked over the scene – Remus, who has still yet to let go of Sirius, his whole body curled around him protectively, and Sirius allowing him. He wondered what Remus thought, that made him give Regulus the same treatment as his older brother. Why he seemed so concerned over them both. He watched silently as Remus seemed to look his brother over for any marks, and then seemed content when the only mark Sirius had was a small cut on his shoulder. Then Remus turned his attention to Regulus.

"Let me look over you." He commanded, as he tried to get closer to Regulus, and Regulus instinctively took steps back. The youngest Black shook his head.

"Why should I?" He asked, sounding petulant, even in his own head. Remus glared at him, lowering his gaze slightly to make the look seem more threatening, and then lowered his voice to that same deep pitch he had used in the sea, and tried again.

"Come here and show me where you're hurt." He ordered, and Regulus felt his feet obey before he his mind had caught up with them. He stood in front of Remus for a moment, and then felt himself turning around, showing off the gash on his back when he had hit something in the initial descent.

He jumped slightly, feeling Remus' fingers wipe at the blood from his cut, and a shiver went through him that had nothing to do with the temperature as he heard a small growl behind him. Had Remus made that sound? It was almost inhuman...

Then Sirius was next to him, fiddling anxiously, glaring between him and Remus, and Regulus felt the jealousy and anger tear through him again – until Remus ordered:

"Calm yourself, Pup." looking directly at Sirius. Regulus felt calm wash over him despite the fact that the order obviously hadn't been meant for him, and sent a small, curious look between his brother and his ex.

Sirius bit his lip, whining gently in a way Regulus had never heard before.

"I can't." He muttered, looking genuinely upset that he couldn't follow through on the command. He huffed. "This is much more difficult for me than you're giving me credit for." He added, training his gaze on the sand under their feet when Remus turned his glare to Sirius.

Regulus turned around fully and watched as Remus surveyed the older black for a moment, and then sighed. The sandy-haired boy reached out and placed a hand on Sirius' neck, brushing his thumb over the dark brown and black patch of skin Regulus had thought might be a tattoo. He moved his thumb in small circles, pressing gently on it, and Regulus watched as Sirius' eyes fluttered closed, and his shoulders seemed to sag. The older Black sibling turned his body slightly, curling further into Remus, and the other Gryffindor hummed low in his throat, keeping up the small circles with his thumb.

"What are you doing?" Regulus asked, before he could wonder whether that was an intrusive question. Remus glanced back at him, stilling rubbing small circles into Sirius' neck, and seemed to open his mouth to answer the question, but then a shout from above interrupted him. They all looked up to see James standing on the cliff-edge above them, waving down at them.

"Hey! We're up here! There are stairs about ten metres to the left, cut into the cliff." He explained, "We've got blankets and hot-chocolate." He added when no one made a move to find the stairs.

When Remus heard the words 'hot-chocolate' he seemed to snap out of whatever alpha-male trance he'd been in, which had allowed him to order the Black brothers about so confidently, and he snatched his hand back from Sirius' neck, who gave a small sigh of disappointment, as all the tension seemed to rush back into his body. The sandy-haired boy grew awkward, looking between them, and then gasped.

"Regulus, you're back is pretty bad – lets get you up the steps and Mrs Potter can probably help heal you up." He gushed, making Regulus glare. He had no idea what had just gone down between the three of them on the beach, but it certainly didn't mean he had forgiven Remus for cheating on him with his own brother. He coughed and stormed past him, spotting the steps cut into the cliff and making his way towards them purposefully.

"I'm fine!" He snapped angrily, refusing to turn around. Had he turned around he might have seen

Sirius curl his fingers into Remus, or the worried look Remus sent after his back. Had he turned around he might have seen Sirius tug on Remus' fingers, trying to get his attention, or how Remus resolutely refused to look at anywhere to Regulus form as he made his way to the steps. Or, had he turned around, he might have seen his brother faint.

"Sirius!" Remus yelled as Sirius went limp next to him, his body falling towards the sand, feeling the tug on his arm where the older Black was holding his hand. Remus went down on his knees next to him, cradling his head and almost recoiling when he felt clammy, feverish skin under his fingers. His yell ran out into the air, and the rest of the party were alerted, from their perch on the cliff-top that something was wrong. Within seconds Euphemia and Fleamont had apparated next to them, grabbed a boy each, and transported them, through more apparition, to the top of the cliff, where the rest of the party was crowded worriedly. Regulus, who had been climbing the stairs, ran the rest of the way to the group, and joined the crowd.

"What's wrong with him?" He asked, as Euphemia frowned and muttered to herself, looking him over. Regulus went to ask again, to add suggestions that maybe his cut was infected, but then Euphemia grazed her hand over that odd tattoo and said:

"What is this?" To the crowd at large. There was a short silence in which no-one answered, but an odd tenseness fell over the teens. Regulus looked around at them all wildly; if they knew something, they should say: his brother was passed-out and maybe that mark had something to do with it!

"What was happening just before he fainted?" He heard Severus ask Remus under his breath. The sandy-haired Gryffindor frowned.

"He was being territorial – so I calmed him."

Regulus didn't know what that meant, or what it had to do with his brother laying unconscious on the cold grass of the cliff-top, but he was drawn to the conversation the two older boys were having under their breath. Severus coughed.

"You did that by the mark?" He asked. Remus nodded.

"Easiest way." He replied. Regulus looked back to his brother, to the strange brown and black mark on his neck. What was going on?

"Nothing to do now, but wake him and deal with the consequences."

Remus frowned at Severus, and Regulus found himself frowning as well.

"What consequences?" Remus asked. "Calming his supposed to be consequence free."

Severus nodded, then glanced around at the gathered people, looking suspicious. Regulus lowered his gaze to make it look like he wasn't listening in.

"I can't explain here. Come with me," He ordered, waving his hand and getting Remus to follow him a little away from the crowd. Regulus wanted to follow, but it would be too obvious that he was trying to listen in, so he turned his attention back to his brother, who was still lying unconscious on the ground.

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Severus took Remus a few steps away from the crowd surrounding Sirius so they could continue their conversation in private. Remus felt the sharp tug of their bond making him want to stay as

close to possible to Sirius, because it appeared his mate was in danger, but he knew the best way to help Sirius would be to get the explanation from Severus, and so allowed the Slytherin to lead him away. They stopped a little way from the crowd and both turned back to the scene, whispering under their breath.

"Usually calming would have no consequences, its a technique Alpha's use on their mates all the time, especially when they get territorial, like you said." Severus agreed. "The difference here is that, if you remember, I gave Black the first of his nightly antidotes to the mark last night, in a hopes of breaking the bond."

Remus felt on edge at the words 'breaking' when used in conjunction with his bond with Sirius, but he knew that was just the mark talking, and so nodded. Severus continued on.

"In response, Black will be trying everything in the book to counteract the antidote – he wants to bond to stay, or at least, the mark on his neck wants to bond to stay. So when you calmed him, putting direct contact on the mark, you reaffirmed the bond. Which means last nights antidote was useless. You need to try and keep your hands to yourself." He admonished. Remus felt suitably chastised, but sucked on his teeth to stop himself from growling back angrily that he didn't want the bond broken – because he did. Severus sighed. "My guess is that Black was craving that touch so much, that when you finally calmed him, his whole body resonated with it, and when you stopped, he would have panicked that you were going to try and pull away from the bond again."

Remus nodded.

"I wasn't paying him much attention... He tried to get my attention and I dismissed him." He responded honestly, feeling terrible for it now. Severus hummed in agreement.

"So his body came up with something that would force you to pay attention, and got him to faint." He replied. "And honestly, it worked. The only issue is I need you two to stop giving in to your base needs – or that mark is never coming off."

Remus looked back over at the small crowd around Sirius, where his mate was beginning to stir back into the land of the awake, having not really needed medical attention, and felt once more the sharp tug of the bond, making him want to go to him. He resisted it, heeding Severus' words, and watched as Lily wrapped her boyfriend in a tight hug, and Sirius looked around, evidently confused as to what had happened.

He felt a spark of jealousy at the red-head and growled low in his throat, watching as Sirius took in a sharp intake of breath and pressed his fingers to his neck, covering the mark that proclaimed him as Remus'. He squished that down too, swivelling his eyes to the smaller, younger Black.

They had to get rid of that mark.

Tea makes it all better

By the time they had managed to return to the Potter's home, Remus was feeling distinctly agitated.

He had suffered the entire journey back with Regulus once more in his lap, trying hard not to move too often, because each time he did it caused the younger Black to colour slightly at the bottom of his neck and over his ears, and that, in turn, had Remus feeling all kinds of perverted things that had him reminding himself forcibly, yet again, that Regulus was only fourteen. Not to mention, that every time that flush of arousal went through him (always followed immediately by the rush of guilt), Sirius would whine or turn his head slightly to the side, where Remus knew, under the cover of his turtle-neck, his own initials were branded on his skin. The mark was making it ever harder for the two of them to ignore each other, and whilst Sirius was responding to Remus' arousal (even if that arousal wasn't specifically aimed at him), Remus was then caught up in the older Black's wafts of submission – which would make him shift slightly in his seat to accommodate the blood rushing south – which would make Regulus blush – which put them all in a vicious loop.

On more than one occasion Remus had gone to touch Sirius, when the boy was shedding off especially demanding pheromones, but one look from Severus, on Sirius' other side, was enough to still his hand. He was annoyed, of course – according to everything in him, the mating mark, the bond, and his own damn biology – Sirius was his to touch as he pleased. And it wasn't like Sirius wasn't all but gagging for it – he probably felt it a personal affront that Remus wouldn't touch him. But Severus, was, of course, right. He couldn't allow himself to swept up in the magic of the mark, and needed to keep his hands off of Sirius for as long as possible if they ever wanted the antidotes, and the ceremony they would attempt on boxing day evening, to be a success.

Which meant he stormed into the Potter's home feeling particularly irate, and incredibly horny. He wasn't allowed to touch Sirius, his *mate*, and for that he felt he might use an unforgivable, but instead he took three steadying breaths, and made his way to the kitchen, where he began the process of making a cup of tea with shaking hands – trying to get his anger under control. Sirius made it no better, by acting like the perfect little mate that he had the potential to be.

"Let me do that." The boy said, coming into the kitchen, looking slighter than Remus had thought he was, and taking the kettle from his hands. The werewolf couldn't tell if his small stature was because he had recently been unconscious, or if it was just because there was so much aggression running through Remus, that Sirius had instinctively made himself look smaller. The images that Remus could remember, of Sirius writhing and naked under him, came unbidden to his mind, and he opened his mouth to breath normally, and not take in the delicious scent of his mate shedding off submissive pheromones with every step he took. He watched, eagerly, hungrily, as Sirius took the kettle to the tap and filled it with water, turning his back to Remus.

Remus allowed himself to look down at his mate's behind – imagined running his hands over it, pushing his thumbs into the fleshy cheeks and spreading them apart. He imagined how Sirius would moan, throwing his head back, baring his neck, breathing out his name over and over again. And then Sirius turned back to him, kettle now full, and Remus took a conscious step backwards, because even if he hadn't been able to smell the other boys arousal, or feel it in his very veins, thanks to the mark, he could see the half-hard length of his mate through the boys jeans, and it was too tempting.

Sirius put the kettle on the stove and flickered the flames into life, bending slightly to watch and make sure the spark took the gas, presenting his clothed ass nicely in front of his mate, and Remus growled low in his throat. Keeping his hands to himself was going to be much harder than Snape

was giving him credit for. Sirius reacted to the growl, the show of masculinity and dominance, and Remus could see his breaths start to come out in short pants. It took everything in his power not to throw the boy onto the kitchen table and take him, roughly, aggressively – to get out all this pent up tension and anger he was feeling inside.

Which was why he was glad of the others finally making their way into the house, having divvied about outside, getting rucksacks and picnic baskets down from the top-box and transfiguring the car back into the Morris Marina it was supposed to be. James made it in first, carrying his and Sirius' backpacks, and he placed them down on the floor beside the kitchen table, and took stock of the boiling kettle.

"Good idea, Moony." He encouraged, making his way to the cupboard across from them and pulling out some mugs. Remus was glad that James had been the one to make that move, because as he reached up into the cupboard above him, his jumper raised up slightly, revealing a sliver of skin between his trousers and the hem of his top – pale from where his abdomen was always covered and rarely got sun, unlike the small tan on his neck and arms. It was pleasing enough to the eye coming from James, but would have been entirely too much had Sirius made that move. Just imagining Sirius reaching up, his stomach flexing as he tried to reach higher, his turtle-neck shifting to reveal the creamy, smooth skin of his back, had him shifting uncomfortably, and he moved slightly to the side as James placed the mugs on the counter-top next to him.

Then Lily pushed into the room, saw the arrangement and smiled.

"That sounds like a plan!" She grinned. "Everyone's freezing! A nice cup of tea will warm them up!"

She placed her rucksack, and Remus' bag, on the floor where James had placed the other two, and turned in time to see Severus and Regulus shuffling into the room. They placed their bags down as well, but the second they did, all of the bags were lifted into the air by a levitation charm, and Remus looked up to see Euphemia guiding them back out into the hall. She and Fleamont were the last into the kitchen, just as the kettle boiled, and Sirius diligently picked it up, filling each mug with water, pouring it slowly over the tea-bags to get the most flavour from them. Remus watched him do it, not saying a word, never taking his gaze away from the delicate way Sirius handled the kettle, or the way he caught his lower lip between his teeth as he concentrated on pouring.

If it wasn't for the other people in the room, Sirius would already be naked, on the floor, shaking with need and pleasure.

A cough roused him from his thoughts, and he took one more look at Sirius' notably flushed face, before turning his attention to the Potter's, who had taken a seat at the table. Sirius bought them over a cup of tea and Euphemia thanked him, before turning to the other teenagers.

"Another successful trip!" She smiled. Remus glanced out the window.

They'd set off for Broadsands early, but it was fairly far away, and with all the mulling and drama and the hot-chocolates everyone had needed after the jump, and then the tortuously long trip back, the sun was already set again. He wondered briefly how Lily and Regulus would be getting back to their own homes, not entirely sure he was comfortable with them walking in the dark. The word *pack* sprung to his mind, but he shook it away. With the way he had treated Regulus, and the way he was continuing to fuck Lily's boyfriend every chance he got, he doubted he could still think of them as part of his pack – and if they had known that was his thought process, they wouldn't *want* to be part of the pack.

Sirius handed out their cups of tea, and then turned to Remus with another steaming mug, and

pressed into his hands with a small, shy smile. The thing about Sirius, was that he wasn't shy. He was something bashful, but rarely shy. And Remus knew it was all the mark making him appear more docile, more helpless – more fuckable. And it was working. He glanced down at their fingers brushing, and wondered what would happen if he pushed them boy against the counter and had his way with him. Would the rest of their party leave – or would they try and pry him off. His werewolf strength was more than enough to keep them away, and then he could do whatever he pleased with his mate. He could take his time, take Sirius apart...

He cleared his head, closing his eyes, and consciously moved away from Sirius, putting himself on the other side of Snape, so that should his thoughts keep going in that direction, then someone who knew some morsel of what he might be going through, could step in. Severus must have known, because he nodded his acknowledgement, and then oddly, spread his feet a little further apart, in a display of dominance that took all of Remus' attention away from Sirius in a second, and honed in on Severus.

As soon as he figured out what had happened, that Severus had challenged him, subtly, and thus shifted his attention off his mate, he smirked. Damn, Snape was good.

"Thanks so much for today, it really was an experience." Remus heard Lily saying, and now that his mind wasn't so full of Sirius, he was able to focus on the conversation happening at the table. Fleamont, Euphemia, Lily, James and Regulus were all sat at the round kitchen table, sipping their tea. Sirius was still stood by the kettle, quietly seething, from what Remus could tell, that Remus had walked away from him; and he and Severus were stood on the other side of the table, surveying the scene. Euphemia smiled at the red-head over the rim of her cup.

"Of course dear, the more the merrier!" She smiled. "I'm just sorry we don't have anywhere for you to stay. I'll get Flea to drive you back after we've all warmed ourselves up a bit." She replied, making Remus breath a small sigh of relief, knowing that at least Lily would have some protection on her journey home. Which just left Regulus.

He'd been avoiding looking at Regulus – he could remember the commanding tones he'd used on the boy on the beach. He could remember the sheer panic he'd felt when he'd come to his senses and seen that ghastly gash on his back. Euphemia had patched him up nicely – there wasn't even a scar – but he still felt some responsibility for it. He could never have known, of course, that they would hit the rocks at the bottom of the cliff, and be overcome by the waves, but Regulus was an important person to him, despite the boy not wishing to be, and he couldn't help the overriding need to protect the youngest Black. Not to mention, there was the utter awkwardness of it all. If things hadn't happened the way they had with Sirius, then he would still be dating Regulus – he might one day have marked Regulus as his mate, instead of the older Black. His logical brain was telling him that that made Regulus the most important person to him, where as his mark-addled brain reminded him that he *had* a mate, and it was *Sirius* Black, not Regulus. Both sides were warring, and both sides came with equal amounts of guilt.

Now he looked at Regulus and saw the same boy he'd fallen head over heels for the year previously, when they'd stood at the top of the grand staircase and Regulus had shyly admitted that he didn't actually own a cat. He wanted to reach out and run his hand through Regulus' perfect curls, to brush his fingers down his porcelain cheek-bones and see the spark of challenge in those stormy grey eyes – but not five minutes previously he had been imagining fucking Sirius over the same table Regulus now sat, and there was so much confusion and upset over it, that instead he turned to Severus and glared threateningly.

Severus responded by placing his own cup of tea down on the top behind him, and leaning back nonchalantly, keeping his body language open and lazy – like it didn't matter that he wasn't on

guard, because Remus would never land an attack anyway. Remus felt a spark of anger rush through him at the arrogant display, at the same time as something in the back of his head told him to stop, to not hurt the Slytherin.

Severus was part of the pack too.

He breathed slowly, closing his eyes to clear his head. Right, that was why he'd put himself by Severus – so the boy could bring him back to reality when he got too mixed up. And he knew it would work because no matter how aggressive Severus got, he also knew there was a mutual respect there, and that he wouldn't hurt Severus – because he was James' mate, and James was his dear friend.

He reminded himself that Severus was James' boyfriend. And that most people didn't call their lover's 'mate', and grew faintly disgusted at himself that his werewolf side was taking over this much, and then tuned back into the conversation once more.

"Did my father tell you when he'd be back to collect me?"

Euphemia and Fleamont shared a look. There was a small silence as the two adults in the room obviously attempted to come up with something to say in response to Regulus' question, and then Fleamont reached across the table and took the youngest Black's hand.

"Your father thought it best that you and your mother had a couple of days apart." He breached cautiously. Regulus snatched his hand away, lips turning into a deep frown, and Remus watched as Fleamont winced, a pitying look taking over him. Remus knew from experience that pity was the last thing Regulus wanted. "Orion has taken your mother to a spa break, just for a couple of days. We said... we said we'd look after you for a bit."

Regulus stood from the table, his chair scraping backwards with a screech, and made as if to leave the room. Remus heard Sirius mutter something which sounded suspiciously like 'fucking typical', and Euphemia gasped in a high-pitched breath of air as she also went to stand. Remus' senses seemed on high alert as Regulus tried to make his way around the table, and the clutter in the room got in his way. Something flashed in the back of his mind that said 'danger' loudly at Remus, and so he pushed himself forwards slightly and said:

"Stop!"

It came out much louder, and deeper, than he had intended. Although honestly he wasn't surprised. He had obviously hit on his alpha-tone again, and Regulus' whole body seemed to freeze in response, his hand out, and stopped about two inches from where he had been about to put it down on the hot stove to catch his balance. Surprisingly, he wasn't the only one who had frozen on Remus' command. Sirius had stopped half way through taking a sip of tea; James had stilled with his hand running through his hair, and Lily had frozen in her attempt to move out of the way for Regulus' escape.

Fleamont, Euphemia and Severus seemed the only ones unaffected, and the Potter parents gave each other an odd look as they surveyed their kitchen and the still teenagers in it, so Remus huffed and said, still in the same commanding tone, but this time solely focused on Regulus.

"Come back here and sit down. You're overreacting."

Regulus spun around, his hand now out of danger, away from the hot stove, and looked like he might protest to Remus' comments, but just made his way back to his seat and lowered himself into it. The rest of the teens seemed to snap out of the trance as well; James finished his hair-styling,

Sirius finished his sip of tea, and Lily almost fell over from trying to get out the way of something that was no longer coming towards her, but managed to right herself.

Fleamont shot Remus a confused look, but didn't say anything, turning his attention back to Regulus.

"I understand it's upsetting. I believe Orion is just trying to do the right thing." He said. Sirius pushed himself off the counter by the kettle and came to stand slightly closer to the table, crossing his arms defensively.

"He does whatever my mother wants him to do. Don't try and kid yourself that this is for Regulus." He butted into the conversation. Remus supposed that came with being so close to James – to having spent most of his holidays with the Potters since he was eleven. Sirius was a second son to the Potters, and that came with certain privileges, like being able to talk back to them sometimes. Fleamont coughed, and Remus also figured that it meant that they would deal out punishments to Sirius, if they saw it fit.

"Butt out, brother." Regulus said, before Fleamont could find a politer way of saying it. Sirius turned to his little brother and glared.

"Come on kid, you've been nothing but the ideal son, and now he's shipping you off? Don't tell me that's because they care about you – it's just Walburga being her usual neglectful, abusive self -"

Sirius was cut off when Regulus stood from the table and wrapped a hand around his turtle-neck. Remus knew from experience that Regulus was more than capable of causing some significant damage to Sirius, should he want to, and so jumped forward – the mantra of 'protect your mate' ever present in his mind, even if now he was protecting him from someone else who was important to Remus.

"You're the one who made her that way! You never thought about how your actions affected her! Or how that affected me! So don't go spewing crap like you care now!" Regulus yelled. Remus pulled him off, but he fought the grip. The boy really must have been strong, because Remus had to actually concentrate on keeping him away from Sirius. Still struggling in his arms, Regulus continued shouting. "The only reason this has happened is because of you. Dad had to get rid of me because she can't look at me. She can't look at me because I look like you! That's always been my fucking curse, I look too much like you!"

Sirius spluttered, Remus fumbled.

He felt wretched. He'd always thought Regulus looked incredibly similar to his brother, had battled with the guilt of pursuing him, because he looked so much like Sirius – who he had always found attractive. Was he one more on a list of people who did that to Regulus?

"Regulus," Said Euphemia, gentle and loving. Euphemia had always been able to love Sirius as if he were her own, and now she was looking at Regulus and it was obviously she loved him too, just as much. She crossed the room, prying him from Regulus' grasp, and pulled him into a hug. "Your mother isn't in a good place right now, but I promise she loves you, darling." She reassured, and suddenly the rest of the teenagers in the room felt awkward. Remus watched as Regulus went from angry, to shaking, and in tears, in less than two seconds, and Euphemia just gripped him tighter. "It's all okay now. It's fine. I've got you." She murmured to him, gently rocking him back and forth. "Let's take you upstairs and get you a bed ready. I want you to sleep on it, and if you still don't want to be here in the morning, I'll call Orion."

She said it so matter-of-fact, that Regulus nodded in her arms, and allowed himself to be lead out of

the room. The rest of the party shared awkward, upset looks, and then Fleamont cleared his throat loudly, and said:

"Right then, young lady, I believe I should get you home."

Lily nodded, standing and collecting her bags. She gave Sirius a brief peck on his cheek, which Sirius did not return, but still left Remus feeling angry and jealous, and then followed Fleamont out of the house and to his car. Remus could hear Regulus upstairs, the sounds of his footsteps and the gentle tones of Euphemia reaching down the stairs, although they couldn't hear what they were saying, and then Snape produced a potion phial from his pocket and placed it on the table in front of Sirius.

"Best take this now, I'm not sure when we'll get another opportunity."

Sirius looked at the antidote solemnly, then nodded and threw it back. Remus felt a surge of anger overtake him as he watched his mate drink the antidote that would break their bond, and had to look away. Just a few more days, and they could put this all behind them for good.

Outburst

Regulus didn't come down for dinner.

Euphemia had spent some time upstairs, setting him up a bed and soothing him, and then allowed him some space, coming back down with a stern look on her face and the instructions that no-one was to disturb him for a bit. She had swept into the kitchen, taken one look around the remaining boys and promptly evacuated them from her kitchen, with orders for James to set the table. She busied herself for some time getting everything ready for the dinner, sending the teenagers at her disposal out to do tasks as and when needed. Remus had been sent out to find thyme and parsley from the garden; Severus had been asked to help chop some vegetables, and Sirius had been put on tea-duty, making sure everyone always had a steaming cup in their hands.

Remus had found that particularly distracting, as he watched his mate teeter around, filling up everyone's cup, leaning slightly to do so, in that he invariably showed off the shape of his ass through his trousers.

Dinner had been made and plated just as Fleamont returned from dropping Lily home, and they all sat around the table, but there was a noticeable empty spot.

"He didn't feel like coming down just yet." Euphemia explained to her husband, who was pulling off his coat, and relaxing into the dining chair. Remus sucked on his teeth to stop from demanding that Regulus come and eat, his overprotective streak all but screaming at him that the youngest Black needed sustenance. Instead, he bit his tongue and watched as the busy household dished out dinner and drinks and settled to eating, and Euphemia surveyed the teenagers and began explaining their new sleeping arrangements. "I've set Regulus up on the top floor, there's more room up there so the three beds still fit nicely. Now, I can tell there is some tension between the lot of you, so who wants to explain what's going on?"

Silence fell over the table. Remus glanced at Sirius, who had stopped eating and was staring at his plate sullenly. James had sat back slightly, holding up his hands as if to say 'I'm not getting involved', and when Euphemia looked to Severus, he just shrugged helplessly – looking lost. Euphemia sighed; Remus clenched his fingers around his fork and concentrated on not actually breaking it.

"Regulus and I were seeing each other, but we broke up just before the holidays." He confessed, trying not to look too bitter. He ignored the angry, upset look that Sirius shot him – but did wonder whether he was receiving it out of jealousy or brotherly protection. He turned to Euphemia. "I'm sorry it's been affecting the mood."

Euphemia rose an eyebrow, but nodded.

"I wish someone had told me that before I invited him here." She confessed, "But, what's done is done, and lord knows that boy needs some friends around him right now. Will it be too hard for you two to be under the same roof?" She asked.

Euphemia had an uncanny knack for sounding like she understood everything – it made Remus feel glad, that despite them both being young, she didn't sound as if she felt their relationship was somehow unimportant. As a gay teen he'd spent most of his life hearing the words 'just a phase' or being told that the relationships he indulged in as a teenager were not 'real love'. To him it wasn't a case of what was real love or not, he felt what he felt, and what he felt was strong. He was constantly hearing how the hormones running around your body as a teenager made everything

seem more than it was, and yet his emotions over another human being were put down as 'puppy love' and unimportant. Euphemia didn't make him feel that way. He thought, for the first time, that if he told her it would be too hard for him to stay under the same roof as Regulus, she wouldn't tell him to buck up, or move on, like it was that simple – but that she would actually find a way to help him.

"Not for me. I can handle it." He told her, and then he frowned at his meal and said, quieter. "He means a lot to me, and I want to be there for him. But if... if I can't handle it later..."

Euphemia smiled.

"Then we'll sort something out then." She assured him. Remus had no doubt that she would, should it be needed, sort something out. She was the embodiment of 'more the merrier' and 'where there's a will there's a way', and he admired her for it greatly. She reached across the table, to where he was sat to her left, and gently squeezed his hand, and then turned to the rest of the household. "So, that means Remus will be sleeping on the middle floor with James, and Sirius and Severus will be up top with Regulus." She concluded, and then sat back and waited for any protests. When none were forthcoming she nodded affirmatively, and then added; "I expect you all to actually stick to those arrangements, this time."

Silence engulfed the table again, except this time it was thicker and more awkward than before. Everyone had stopped what they were doing; James with his fork half way to his mouth, jaw hanging open slightly; Sirius with a bright flush creeping over his ears; and Severus, who had caught eye-contact with Euphemia and was now involved in a tense staring contest. And then Fleamont turned to his son, glaring slightly, and said:

"Yes." As if that settled it.

Remus didn't think he'd ever seen James blush quite that hard. He knew James had some pretty thorough daddy-issues, not that the Quidditch captain would ever admit it, but he hadn't known just how deep they ran until that moment. Remus had expected James to splutter over his dinner, and make up excuses or even outright lie to his father about what he and Severus had been up to when left alone in his room – but instead James just turned his gaze down, an ashamed look on his face, and placed his fork back down on his plate – pushing the food away from him slightly.

"Yes dad." He replied, still insanely red around his ears, and looking for all the world like he might burst into tears.

Remus would have thought that impossible – because James really wasn't a crier – but having witnessed the boy sob uncontrollably the day before, he was beginning to re-assess that theory. Something instinctual took hold in his gut, and before he knew it he had stood from the table, and all eyes were on him. He stared back, wondering what on earth he was doing standing so abruptly, and what his plan had been at all – except for the instinct to protect James, who still looked down-trodden, even looking up at Remus in shock and confusion – and then he slowly lowered himself back into his seat. He reminded himself once more that James was more than capable of looking after himself, and despite what hierarchy Remus' own brain had set out for he and his friends, he had no right to instil his idea of a pack on people who were all human and would inevitably reject the idea of it if they had any inkling of the types of instincts Remus had – even if they had stopped when he ordered them to.

Dinner conversation quickly turned away from their sleeping arrangements, discussing various topics, from how they were almost certain they would never make that jump again next year (Remus thought if he was invited back for another Potter Christmas he might just refuse), to how Euphemia had ordered flowers for the little girl three doors down, who was badly ill, but would

probably make a full recovery given lots of rest and medication.

"They were so good to us when Jamie got ill, I wish there was more I could do for them."

James had stiffened at the words, and Remus noted, whether consciously or not, that he hadn't eaten another bite since his father had put him in his place with that one little word. He remembered last year, when James had gone months surviving on bare scraps that he could keep down, and another flush of worry went through him, clenching painfully in his stomach. Suddenly, he didn't feel very hungry either, and he put his fork down on his plate with a good quarter of his meal left to go. James meal had barely been touched.

He wondered... maybe he could...

"James, you should eat." He suggested, trying to make his voice as low as possible, and only sounding like he'd got a frog stuck in it. James looked up at him, across the table, raising one eyebrow at the deepness of his friend's tone, and snorted in what Remus assumed was awkward amusement.

"I'm not hungry." He replied. "I had a big lunch."

It was a lie. Remus didn't exactly know how he knew it was a lie, because there had been a big picnic at the bay, and he hadn't exactly been watching James take every bite, but he knew, almost instinctively, that the boy had only had scraps then as well. He clenched his hand into a fist under the table. Every time he had managed to use the alpha-tone, it had been subconsciously, but he hadn't thought it would be difficult to emulate it if he was only trying to help his friend out. Apparently, he'd thought wrong. He tried to focus once more on getting his voice to come out deep, and commanding, and kept his eyes trained on James, who was part of the pack in his mind. Who was probably the member of the pack who needed most support and care, although he would never tell James he thought as much.

"You should eat." He repeated, but James just glared at him.

"Do you have a sore throat, dear?" Euphemia asked, pausing in her chatter to Fleamont to turn to him. Remus felt an unfamiliar heat creep up his neck, and realised he was pretty embarrassed. He'd tried twice now to exercise his power as Alpha, and each time he'd failed. It shouldn't be so hard to do something consciously that he had been doing subconsciously all day; but it seemed he couldn't use the alpha-tone at will. He heard James snort again, this time in what appeared to be anger, and turned his face down to his unfinished meal – he had just been trying to help!

"No." He said, and then coughed because now his throat actually was hurting a little where he'd been trying to speak in a tone way too deep for his actual range. "Just a little." He then added, feeling foolish.

He let the rest of the dinner happen around him, trying not to focus on his failures, and only spoke when spoken to. Before long plates were being packed up and taken to the kitchen, and the table was left unattended as people retired to the lounge. Remus watched as Sirius once more offered to make tea, and stole into the kitchen alone to carry out the task. A small impulse to follow him made itself known, but he squashed it down, turning instead with the rest of the household towards the living space. Euphemia and Severus were already settling on to sofa's, so he joined them, and then looked around to see James and Fleamont had hung back in the dining room, talking under their breath.

James felt a churning in his stomach as he stared down his father, watching his mother, boyfriend and friend leave through the large archway into the living room, where they settled on the sofas and began talking animatedly again. He, instead, was left in the dining room with his dad. The table had been cleared, all the plates collected and put away in the kitchen for washing up – the glasses too, and the table cloth bunched up and placed in a hamper. The chairs around the table were slightly haphazard where they hadn't all been pushed back in properly, and the he turned his eyes away from them, but couldn't meet his dad's eyes, and so instead looked at the large display cabinet taking up the wall he was stood next to.

He really hated the cabinet. It had an array of potions ingredients, pretty phials and small cauldrons, and also certificates of achievements and letters of recognition, all about Sleakeazy. There was a shelf where the boxes the potion was sold in, with the brightly coloured proclamations of how well it worked printed on them, sat – starting from the prototype box Sleakeazy had first been sold in, before James had been born, and working up to the current model. There were shelves dedicated to Fleamont's new endeavours, a plaque which labelled him as the head of his potions making company, and pictures of him with prominent members of said company. Everything in the cabinet reminded James that despite Fleamont's wishes, he would never live up to him – he would never take over the company, or make a potion of his own. Even if he hadn't contracted Cinis, making him near useless in a potions lab, he had always been terrible at brewing. His father had spent many an afternoon attempting to drill the art of it into his son, but James had never managed to get the hang of it – and now he never would.

Fleamont had never understood his want to play Quidditch – had always told James it was a good sport for school, but it wasn't a career. But James didn't think anything else made sense. Sure, he was pretty good with a wand, and transfiguration was probably one of his best classes – but what career could you have with transfiguration? Even his achievement of becoming an animagus (which he *knew* was pretty impressive) didn't exactly open up doors for him – especially since he had done it illegally. He knew he needed extra help in charms, and although he had attempted his luck at divination, it had become increasingly apparent that staring into tea-leaves was giving him very little information about his own future. He wasn't like Moony, who knew he wanted to be a healer, or Severus, who had the talent and patience to create something from nothing – the only thing that had ever made sense to him was flying, and he was *good* at it.

But Fleamont had never seen that, he had wanted a son who would take over his company, and James had about as much chance of successfully brewing potions as a chocolate frog had of being kissed by its true love and turning into prince Charming.

"So, son, I think we need to talk." Fleamont began, tone low. Even so, he pointed his wand behind him and cast a spell over the archway that would muffle their conversation. For that, at least, James was glad. He took a deep breath to calm himself, because no matter how he looked at it, this conversation was going to be mortifying, and nodded. Fleamont frowned, his lips going thin in a way that reminded James of McGonagall, and then he decided not to dwell on that because the image of his dad in anyway resembling his favourite teacher was putting him on edge. "I can't say I'm happy that you're sexually active."

Oh god, what the hell did 'sexually active' even *mean*? He sounded like those stuffy healers that reminded you regularly that if you even looked at someone and thought of them as attractive then you probably had an STI. James didn't expect his dad to start flinging around colloquialisms, or bang on about the intricacies of guy on guy sex – but 'sexually active'? *Really*? The man was covering everything from a quickie wank to full blown anal-fucking, and all the fun activities in between, with one vague and overused phrase.

James fought the urge to purse his lips in annoyance, figuring it wasn't a good idea to tell his father

that not only was he 'sexually active', but had been engaging in various sexual acts with a multitude of partners way before he officially got together with Severus. Heck, he could remember the first girl he kissed, and how quite a few months later he'd slipped his fingers down her skirt, into her panties, and inside her – he'd definitely been too young for it at the time, but Fleamont was worried about what sex he had with Severus, a few years later?

"I am sixteen." He heard himself saying. In less than a year he'd be seventeen – the trace would be taken off him, he'd be allowed to use magic outside of school, and would be expected to have his mind set on a career, because he would be seen as an adult – but he wasn't allowed to have sex?

Fleamont huffed through his nose, leaning against the table and crossing his arms, surveying his son for a long moment. He sighed, and ran a hand through his thinning hair, reminding James of himself.

"It's not your age, son." He confessed. "I'm not stupid, I remember being your age, and I know for a fact that I can't stop you from getting up to this kind of thing at school. Heck, sneaking into another house to get into someone's pants is basically a right of passage at Hogwarts!"

James really didn't want to hear about his dad's school days, especially not what night-time activities the man had been getting up to, but he hummed in his throat and said:

"So it's because we did it here?"

Fleamont nodded, but he shrugged his shoulders at the same time in a 'maybe' sort of gesture.

"Somewhat. Your mother and I knew of your relationship and we don't protest it, but we did ask you not to sleep in the same room. You did break the rules." He said. James couldn't deny that, so he hung his head and nodded. Fleamont ran his hand through his hair again, looking as awkward as James felt, and sighed once more. "But... Jamie... I worry about you. Severus is a great lad, but he's still..." He broke off, looking concerned. "Look, I don't want you to think of me as homophobic, because that isn't what this is – but Severus is a guy, and you know as well as I do that guys can be very one-track-mind. And you're... you're fragile. I don't want to think you got pressured into this and he's taking advantage of you."

Whatever protests James had expected his father to have, that wasn't it. To some extent he had expected Fleamont to bring up Severus' gender, and he wasn't sure whether that would have been out of homophobia, or just because his dad was older and more traditional than he liked to admit, but he certainly hadn't expected his father to be so concerned over his sons... fragility.

"Excuse me?" He asked, feeling bowled-over and more than a little insulted. Fleamont huffed.

"Oh Jamie, don't even try and deny it. You've always been sensitive. In part that's our fault; your mother and I wanted you so much, that when you finally came along we spoilt you as much as we could. Not a day went by when you didn't scrape your knee or elbow - and we'd molly-coddle you. I mean honestly James, you were still sneaking into our room after we'd watch a horror film to sleep in with us when you were fifteen! I've no doubt you'd do it now if we allowed you to watch one."

James could feel himself flushing hotly, in embarrassment and anger. Is this really how his parents saw him? Spoilt, coddled and weak? Even now he could feel himself shaking slightly, and the pinprick of tears behind his eyes. He told himself now was definitely not the time to burst into tears, lest he prove his father right, and took in deep breaths to try and calm himself.

"I'm not being pressured into anything." He stated, trying to bring them back to the original topic,

despite no part of him actually wanting to discuss it. He supposed the quicker they talked it through and he got his lecture - the better, and he didn't want his dad getting side-tracked.

Fleamont frowned a little, looking at his son curiously.

"James... from what I heard the other night... things weren't exactly... *you* weren't exactly..." He trailed off, frowning and refusing to look at his son, looking incredibly uncomfortable. James knew how he felt. Fleamont huffed. "It just felt very one sided – like maybe you were allowing him to take more from you than you should be giving him."

James clenched his hand into a fist in an attempt to stop his shaking. He was mortified of what Fleamont was alluding to – of what his father might have heard. He remembered the night in question – with Severus pushing into him, and the breathy, high-pitched, needy noises he had uttered in response. Thinking that his own father had overheard them, had basically had to listen to his son get fucked in the room across the hall, was sickeningly embarrassing. And now Fleamont was telling him; trying to explain that he knew Severus was calling the shots, and that that, in turn, made James the weaker party. The teen was suddenly reminded of Sirius, staring off with him in the Gryffindor common room and asking James if Severus ever let him top – asking James if he had ever even wanted to top. Sirius, too, thought of James as weak; sensitive; fragile... a princess, he had been called.

Before he knew it, the doors of the potions display cabinet – the same one James had blown up the day before – shattered; sprinkling glass out over them. There was a small yelp in the next room that James assumed was his mother. Despite Fleamont's charms to muffle their conversation, the explosion of glass would have shocked the barrier and crumbled it. Fleamont cursed, dragging out his wand to once more fix the thing, but James was still angry, and there was no point repairing it if James would just blow it up again.

James looked down at his feet as he spoke.

"Why does nobody ever think that maybe I just like it?" He asked. "I'm not hung up on which one of us is running the show, or wearing the trousers, or whatever you want to call it – although we all know full well it's Severus, and I'm fine with that. I don't get why everyone is so worried about who's fucking who – so Severus fucks me, okay – so what? I haven't asked him whether we can switch it up because... because I don't want to. I enjoy it the way things are." He broke himself off as he suddenly realised that their muffling charm had been blown out, and Severus was staring straight at him through the archway with a look somewhere between panic and satisfaction, which was confusing to say the least – not to mention Remus, Sirius and his mother were looking incredibly awkward.

He knew he should be embarrassed, but he was more angry than anything. He was fed up of people telling him he was sensitive, or a princess. Nobody fucking knew what he went through on a day to day basis, thanks to Flamouriades. Nobody could understand that he was constantly battling for control of his own body, and that sometimes it was nice to just give up that control to someone he could trust. Besides, what did it matter if he was exclusively submissive for Severus? It felt *good* to be pleased by him. The conversation about what they had been up to should have been a lecture about not partaking in under age sex – it shouldn't have made a difference whether he was giving or receiving.

Fleamont made an odd sound in his throat like he wanted to reprimand James, but had thought better of it, and then spoke in surprisingly gentle tones.

"Jamie, I told you, I just worry because you're -"

"Fragile? I'd like to see you throw up eighty percent of your meals and not be a little *fragile*! Or were you going to say sensitive? Because I bet if your body was constantly fighting between elation and heart-break you would be a little *sensitive* too! Or maybe – maybe you were going to say delicate – well in that case, please go ahead and have all of the strength sapped out of you for four out of seven days of the week, and show me how that doesn't make you *delicate*!" He ranted, voice growing steadily louder the more he said. He gulped in a big breath of air, and then interrupted Fleamont once more as the man tried to protest. "I have an illness which is literally Latin for *ash-binding*, do you have any idea how scary that is? And it's never going away! It all but kills me every day of my life, and I continue on. I wake from nightmares every single fucking night, terrified I'm going to burn up one day, and every morning I stave off the panic attacks and pretend that I'm okay. But I'm not! I haven't been okay for a long time, and it's all just getting fucking worse! But still, still I continue on. So don't you... don't you fucking call me weak..."

He fell to his knees, all of the strength and anger suddenly gone from him, his last words coming out as little more than a whisper, and tried to cover his eyes, because he was crying again, and he didn't want to prove Fleamont right. He felt strong arms circle around him, and knew from the shape and coolness of them that they belonged to Severus, and tried to stop his hiccuping sobs.

"I never... I've never thought of you as weak, son."

He looked up, through Severus' arms, to his dad, who was still standing, leaning against the table, but looked shocked and concerned. He wiped furiously at his eyes, and tried to breathe in deep breaths to stop his panic. He hadn't meant to get so upset – hadn't meant to rant about his illness, or act hard done by. He knew, realistically, that things could be a lot worse than they were – but it didn't stop him feeling scared that his symptoms were growing worse, or that his illness might one day take over. He just... he hated the idea of being called weak when he was constantly, constantly fighting.

Severus held him slightly tighter in his arms, and pushed his nose into James' hair; much cuddlier than he had ever been in the past. James found he didn't mind the PDA. In fact, some part of him revelled in it.

"Right." He heard his mother's voice call across the short distance, awkward in the outburst James had just made. He suddenly felt exhausted and emotional, and wondered whether he could convince Severus to just carry him everywhere from now on. "I think that about makes it time for bed."

Christmas

The day after their trip to Broadsands, after the mortifying dinner in which James' father tried to talk to his son about James' relationship, was a quiet, peaceful day in which Euphemia took the boys who weren't quite done with their Christmas shopping to Diagon Alley for some last minute things. James and Sirius were the only two needing to finish up their gift buying – and because Remus thought it would do them some good to have some time apart, he had wished his mate goodbye and left him in the care of Euphemia.

Which left Remus, Severus, Regulus and Fleamont at the cottage. Regulus had pouted his way through breakfast, not saying a word to anyone, and had retired soon after to his bedroom at the top of the house. Without Sirius around, Remus' head was much clearer, and a large part of him wanted to follow Regulus up the stairs, get down on his knees and grovel for forgiveness – but he knew Regulus would kick him out just as soon as look at him. Instead, he spent the day with Severus, who had declined Fleamont's offer to brew up some 'fun' potions.

Severus had not so much said that he was upset with Fleamont, and how he had made James upset the night before – and Remus doubted the Slytherin would ever tell his host that he was annoyed with him -, but the boy made it quite clear that he was otherwise pre-occupied through most of the day. Each time Fleamont came to check on them, Severus all but gave him the cold shoulder, and would loudly proclaim how he and Remus were busy. It wasn't a complete lie – he and Remus were busy, getting things ready for the ceremony that would take place on Boxing Day night.

Sirius had to take an antidote every day to try and counteract the effects of the mark. Remus, instead, was subjected to finding a safe place to carry out the ceremony without anyone finding out about his furry little problem, and setting it up so that when he did transform, he wouldn't be a danger to anyone. The closer it came to the full-moon, the more worried Remus became.

The thought invaded his mind that maybe he should just keep Sirius as his mate... it would be much less dangerous, and it wouldn't be so bad. He did find Sirius attractive, after all. Then he remembered Regulus, stewing quietly upstairs, and Lily – who was the person Sirius truly loved. He would have to buck up and go through with the ceremony – even though Severus was fairly secretive about what it would involve – which put his stomach on edge.

The day after, after an awkward dinner around the table and an early retirement to bed, found the entire household in the garden, collecting herbs and vegetables for the Christmas dinner Euphemia had planned in a couple of days time, when Severus turned to Fleamont and said:

"Is this Dittany?"

Fleamont looked relieved to be addressed, especially about potions-making, which was a subject he and Severus enjoyed talking about. He nodded and then pointed out a few more magical herbs he had been growing in his garden.

"I've got Aconite and Wormwood as well." He pointed out, showing off the small herb garden.
"And of course there's the Wiggentree."

Severus nodded, glancing towards the tall tree at the back of the garden, and smiling, as if this was something he too aspired to have one day. Remus caught James listening in to their conversation,

and winked when James looked over at him. They did say girls married their fathers, and Remus could see that to be true for gay people as well. He'd never say as much to James, but he did find it amusing that for someone who hated potions so much, which was routed in his dislike for his dad's aptitude for it, James had chosen to shack up with Severus – who loved potions.

"Do you have any Moondew?" Asked the Slytherin. Fleamont gave a half impressed, half exasperated puff of breath.

"I wish I did!" He replied. "Stuffs a bugger to grow in the soil here though. It needs a more Scottish climate. Were you in need of some?"

Severus nodded, frowning slightly.

"I thought I'd have to go up to Scotland to get it fresh ... but I don't know any floo-network connections up there." He confessed. Fleamont grinned.

"Don't be silly, Sev!" He yelped excitedly. "I'll Apparate you there!"

Euphemia looked like she might protest her husband kidnapping one of her helpers and teleporting him to Scotland, but Fleamont looked so happy to have found a way to get back in to Severus' good books that she held her tongue. Severus looked apprehensive, but Fleamont just grinned at him.

"It'll be a short trip." The older man reassured. "Twenty minutes tops."

That mollified everyone slightly, and soon Snape was nodding.

"I'll just need to go and get my collectors." He excused, rushing back into the house to round up some bits and bobs.

A few minutes later, he had returned to the garden, and he and Fleamont had Disapparated with a loud crack. Which left everyone else to return to their tasks of collecting herbs for the Christmas dinner. They were all bent over, picking the green routes from the ground when another loud crack happened. Assuming it was Severus and Fleamont back from their trip, nobody looked up right away – but then a quiet cough roused them to look around.

"Dad?" Asked Regulus happily, standing from his kneeling position and moving towards his father. Orion Black was tall, and imposing, and looked very much like an older version of his sons. His hair was kept a little shorter, and he kept it swept back and held in place with some gel. He had the same pale skin and straight-backed posture and stormy grey eyes, and Remus allowed himself the thought that if he ever did get back together with Regulus, and the boy turned out to look like Orion when he aged, then Remus wouldn't mind one bit.

Now, however, Orion looked awkward, and had taken off his hat, wringing it in his hands as Euphemia jumped up and brushed down her dress.

"Orion!" She yelped. "I didn't know you were coming."

Orion nodded nervously, and waved for her to follow him. They made their way over to the edge of the garden and began talking in hushed tones. Remus glanced over to Sirius and Regulus, who were sharing a confused, worried look – it was obvious neither of them could hear what was being said between the two parents. Remus was slightly closer, and his werewolf senses made his hearing slightly better – he tried not to rely on it, but now he was able to hear with clarity what Orion and Euphemia were discussing.

"It's only for a few more days, 'Mia." Orion explained. "I wouldn't ask, but the therapist at the spa

thinks she's made real progress and these few extra days could be all the difference!"

Euphemia frowned.

"I do understand..." She began. "But... well, I think Regulus really misses home." She replied. Orion nodded.

"I miss him too." He confessed. "I miss both of them." He added, quieter, so that Remus almost missed it. The werewolf shot a quick look at Sirius, who had turned back to picking herbs and was resolutely trying to ignore his father's presence. Remus could practically see the tension shedding off him, and his instinct was to go over and comfort his mate, but he held back, because he knew if he touched Sirius then the mark would make them do more, and then all the antidotes Sirius had been taking would count for nothing.

"It's more complicated than all that." Euphemia replied, "It appears Regulus and Remus used to date. It's awkward for him here."

Orion blinked at her, his expression turned almost dumb, and then he laughed.

"That must be a misunderstanding. Regulus isn't gay." He told her. Euphemia shrugged.

"Well, it's that age for discovering oneself." She replied. Remus inched forwards slightly as Orion's expression turned sour. His tone, when he next spoke, was almost like a warning.

"Not Regulus." He said. "Regulus is not gay." He said as if thinking his son might be gay was almost repulsive. Remus reminded himself of all the things he'd heard over the years – that despite Sirius still wanting to have a relationship with his family, his parents weren't exactly the kindest of people.

Euphemia bristled, and her tone turned waspish.

"And what exactly is wrong with being gay?" She asked. It seemed, however, that Orion wasn't listening to her. He turned and started striding towards where Regulus and Sirius were busying themselves.

"Regulus!" He all but shouted, even though he was right next to his son. "You should explain to Mrs Potter that you are not romantically interested in boys and never will be, now." He commanded. Regulus looked petrified.

Sirius stood and placed himself between his father and his brother, looking defiant.

"He doesn't need to." The older sibling said. For a second, Orion looked like he might do something drastic, and then he took a deep breath and sighed, before smiling slightly.

"Right, of course. Of course you're right, son." He said. "No one would believe such nonsense about a Black."

Sirius opened his mouth, looking like he was going to angrily protest, but Regulus beat him to it.

"No, dad." He interrupted, then seemed to steel his courage. "I am gay."

An icy silence filled the garden, and then Orion seemed to explode with noise.

"You are NOT!" He shouted. "This is a ridiculous lie! You can not be gallivanting around with boys when you have the responsibility to carry on the Black family name! This is more un-befitting

of a Black than when your brother got sorted into Gryffindor! Even Sirius would not give us such vile lies such as being a faggot!"

Euphemia gasped angrily and rushed forwards, James flinched, standing from where he had been pretending to still be gardening. Remus took three steps towards the Blacks and got to them just as Regulus shouted.

"Oh yeah? Well here's news for you! Sirius is a fucking faggot as well, so I guess you just raised us that way!"

Sirius flinched, then blushed heavily and crossed his arms over his chest defensively. It took all of Remus' self control not to reach out and pull his mate into an embrace. He was lucky he still had his hands free though, because at that moment Orion raised his hand, and Remus reacted quickly enough to pull Regulus out of harms way, and catch Orion's raised fist as it came down. Remus held it in his hand and glared at his friends father. He was taller than his friends, and stood roughly the same height as Orion – but he was much more muscular, and he noticed after a second that Orion had obviously realised that, because the older man backed off, breathing heavily and angrily.

Remus pushed Sirius and Regulus behind him protectively and glared some more. Euphemia stepped forward.

"I think you better leave, Orion." She said, tone measured in a way that suggested she was beyond furious. "You need to have some time out and think about your actions here today."

Orion instantly protested.

"They're *my* sons, 'Mia."

Euphemia clenched his hands into fists at her sides and Remus noticed how her wand had migrated to her fingers.

"I would *like* you to leave." She said, leaving no room for negotiations. Orion took one more glance at his sons, and then sighed.

"This discussion isn't over." He told them, before Disapparating.

The second he was gone Euphemia shoved her wand back in her apron pocket and huffed.

"Isn't over my left foot!" She mumbled. "If he wants to come back here after that it will be on his knees, with a formal apology letter. His sons, ha! What has he done to be able to say that? You're *my* boys!" She added, stepping forwards and wrapping both the Black siblings into a tight hug. Remus watched as Sirius seemed to melt into her motherly embrace, and Regulus stood rigid for a moment, before his expression softened and he gently mumbled:

"Thank you, Mrs Potter."

Euphemia pulled back, and nodded after a moment.

"No need for thanks Regulus." She gently admonished. "But I am sorry to say you'll have to stay with us for a few more days. You're mother is still at the spa, and I wouldn't feel comfortable sending you back to Orion at the moment, anyway."

Regulus nodded, and shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you know how many more days until my mum gets back?." He asked, subdued. Remus placed

a hand on his wrist, but Regulus pulled it away. Euphemia glanced down at it, but then shrugged.

"I'm not sure honey," She replied. "Best if maybe you stayed here until the end of the holidays."

Regulus looked as if he was about to protest, but then just nodded, looking at the ground. Even if he had tried to say something – it would have been drowned out by Fleamont returning with Severus, and the Moondew. Remus glanced at the ingredients with Severus' arms, whilst Euphemia quickly dragged Fleamont away to fill him in.

Remus frowned. This ritual was going to be even harder if Regulus was going to be staying over Boxing Day.

James woke on Christmas day feeling quietly excited. He knew it was childish, but there was something magical about Christmas day that went beyond wand-waving and incantations. It went beyond brewing potions and divining secrets in crystal balls – this was a magic that was more fairytale and secretive – the type of magic even Muggles could indulge in. The utterly pretend, but no less exciting, kind.

He glanced across at Remus, sleeping peacefully in the second bed, having never been one for early mornings. The werewolf was worried about the ritual Severus was preparing them all for tomorrow, and James couldn't blame him – Severus had been insanely secretive about what the ritual entailed, even with him, and it was putting everyone on edge. But for now, it was Christmas, and all those worries could be washed away, just for one day.

On the realisation that Regulus would be staying with them for Christmas, Euphemia had dragged all the boys out shopping once more, and now James knew there would be a large pile of presents under the tree ready to be dished out as soon as everyone was downstairs and had a glass of warm, spiced, mulled-wine in their hands. With this in mind, James groggily extracted himself from the covers and pulled some clothes from his dresser over to the mirror to get changed.

"Your hair is a mess." The mirror told him, voice jolly. James poked his tongue out at it.

"Your glass is a mess." He shot back, but the mirror only laughed.

He pushed his hands through his hair and tried to get it to lay a little flatter, turning slightly to get a good look at his outfit. He'd opted for grey jeans that had faded over the knees and frayed at the bottom, but looked really good over his thighs; a black t-shirt that had the bright band-logo of the popular wizard rock band 'Chasing Quaffles' emblazoned on the front; and then a green tartan shirt unbuttoned over the top of it. He felt critical about it, because he really wanted to look good, but like he wasn't trying too hard. He remembered in ridiculous detail the last Christmas he'd spent with Severus, when he'd only had a crush on the boy, and didn't think his feelings would ever be returned, and he was looking forward to seeing Severus enjoying the magic of Christmas again.

Plus, it was the only day of the year when Sirius laid aside his hatred for the Slytherin, and something about that made James want to dress up for the occasion.

"Your ass looks great in those jeans!" The mirror announced loudly, and James hastily shushed it. He knew damn well his ass looked great in these jeans, it was the deciding factor on choosing them (after all, there might be Christmas sex!) but he didn't need the mirror announcing it at the top of her voice at seven-thirty in the morning, when his grumpy werewolf friend was trying to get some shut-eye.

"She does have a point, you know."

James spun, turning to Remus, who was sitting up in bed and had been looking at James' behind in scrutinization, but now that James had turned the werewolf was now staring at James' crotch, and he looked up hurriedly.

"I wouldn't let Sev hear you say that." James shot back. He watched, almost incredulously, as Remus' emotions played out on his face and then seemed to settle on annoyance. The werewolf stood from the bed, revealing his muscular, scarred chest and then the tense muscles of his thighs as he stood, in only a pair of thin, slightly ridden up boxers. James glanced down at his friends crotch, feeling justified because Remus had done it to him, and wondered, not for the first time, whether he was gay, or just Severus-sexual.

"I don't think Snape gets a say in what I do or say." Remus told him, talking purposeful steps across the room towards him. James flicked his eyes back up to his friends face and tried not to gape at the aggressive, dominant look on the boys face.

Remus had been playing at being a pack-leader since the beginning of the holidays. James had done enough research on werewolves, thanks to his involvement in the Wolf's Bane potion, to know that Remus had been discovering his Alpha Tone, and been trying to figure out where everyone stood in his own little pack. From conversations James had engaged in with Severus they had figured out that Remus saw himself as the pack-leader and Sirius as his mate, which left James, Severus, Lily and Regulus as members of that pack that didn't have an entirely defined role. James knew, however, that Remus viewed Severus as another dominant male, and thus, also a little bit as a threat. He also knew that with the antidotes Sirius had been drinking, the affects of the mark had been loosening it's hold on both Sirius and Remus in the last few days.

Now, the open hostility Remus had shown at the mention of Severus, had surprised James, and put him on edge. He stepped backwards slightly, into the mirror, who gave an offended 'ouf!', but Remus crowded him up against the wall. Suddenly, James was nervous.

"Hey Moony..." He mumbled, placing his hands on Remus' chest and feeling the ripple of muscles underneath his fingers. He gulped gently. "What are you doing?" He asked.

Remus leant down towards James and his breath ghosted over James ear.

"Your shirt label is poking out." He said, reaching his hands behind James' neck and tucking the label back down into it's collar. James breathed out heavily, and then laughed incredulously.

"Merlin Moony!" He cried, "I thought you were going to... I don't know... stake your claim on me or something!"

Remus snorted, eyes widening.

"Right, so I compliment you on your jeans and that means I want to fuck you? For a gay guy you can be so straight sometimes." He admonished, turning and picking some clothes from his pile on floor and pulling them on.

James breathed another sigh of relief, leaning back against the wall as he watched Remus get dressed. He felt stupid now for thinking that Remus was going to do something untoward, but he reminded himself that the hostility towards Severus' name had been real, and that Remus really did view himself as pack leader. His werewolf side was creeping out into his human side, and James would have to be more careful if he wanted to keep everyone happy.

Remus turned back to him and winked.

"Don't worry, I won't tell Severus how you totally checked me out just now."

James coughed, blushing a little because he couldn't deny it – he had unabashedly given Remus the once over – and had felt a little weak in the knees feeling his friend's muscles under his fingers. He turned his head away as he responded.

"You're an idiot."

It wasn't witty, but it would do.

He made his way out of the bedroom and down the stairs, followed by Remus, who was looking fairly proud of himself, and found the rest of the family already awake and going about their business. Regulus was sat on the sofa with his feet tucked up underneath him, wearing a crisp white shirt and some dark grey suit trousers, watching as Fleamont dished out mulled wine to Severus, who had his long fingers wrapped around his glass and a gentle smile on his face. In the kitchen Euphemia was busying herself with the turkey whilst Sirius was stood at the counter, a piping bag in hand as he decorated gingerbread biscuits with iced snowflakes. He had tied his hair back with a white ribbon, and was wearing another turtle-neck jumper, but this one was a deviation from the usual greys and blacks, and was instead a light red that could, under some circumstances, have been mistaken for pink. Over the top he'd borrowed one of Euphemia's frilly, flowery aprons, and the entire effect was incredibly domestic and feminine.

James and Remus shared a look.

"That's just not fair." Remus said, and James nodded.

"That could even make me want to be a top." He replied, making Remus snort loudly, and Sirius turn around with a confused look on his face.

"What does?" He asked, but the boys just shook their heads.

"We'll see you in the living room." Remus told him, and turned with James back to the safety of the lounge.

By the time Sirius and Euphemia had joined them, all the boys had their own glass of spiced mulled wine, and were talking excitedly about what the day would bring. There was a great flurry as presents were dished out, and then opened. James watched out of the corner of his eye as Severus opened his present from James (a replacement hairband for the one he had been given the year before – which resulted in Severus placing a hand on his knee teasingly) and as Sirius and Remus both opened their presents from him (Sirius got a broomstick maintenance kit, and Remus an edition of 'The Healers Complete Guide to Magical Maladies'), but mostly James watched Regulus, who was handling each gift in the same manner as Severus – as if he could really believe he had received any.

He watched, as surreptitiously as he could, as Regulus unwrapped an array of sweets and chocolates from Euphemia and Fleamont, which included Euphemia's home-made toffees, and reminded himself to warn Regulus that he might break his teeth on them later, and then he jabbed Sirius in the side to get his attention.

"I thought you said you did Christmas at Grimmauld Place?" He half stated, half asked. He was still looking at Regulus, and Sirius followed his gaze, and then shrugged.

"We did, but not like this." He replied. "It was mostly just a sit down lunch made by the house-elf,

one present each and maybe a piano recital if mum could convince one of us to do so. The only decorations were the tree, and that was usually packed away by three in the afternoon."

James frowned at the idea of Christmas being over with so quickly, and pondered how over the years his mum and dad had ended up picking up some strays in desperate need of some love. The Christmas at the Black Household sounded like a stuffy, mostly unpleasant affair – Severus had never even celebrated Christmas until the year before. It saddened him, but made him even more determined to show them how the holiday should be.

The morning progressed with people opening gifts, refilling drinks, checking on the Christmas lunch in the oven, and enjoying the biscuits Sirius had iced, until finally it seemed as if all the gifts had gone and the turkey would soon be ready. Sirius had challenged Severus to a rematch of the Tiddlywinks game they had started the year before, and James was readying himself to get another drink when Remus said:

"Hey Prongs, there's a present here for you."

It was a small, unnoticeable box that had obviously fallen behind a branch of the tree and got lost. James frowned slightly – he'd already opened gifts from his parents and all his friends, and the box itself was curious. It was small, and for one brief moment James had the idle thought that maybe it was a ring box, and Severus was about to propose, but then he pushed that aside with a small blush, and took the gift from Remus. It had a ribbon tied around it, and in the fold of the ribbon was a card, so he tugged that out and opened it first.

To Prongs,

Merry Christmas!

James found himself frowning a little more. Given the nickname in the card the gift should be from either Remus or Sirius, but he'd already had gifts from them both. He pulled off the ribbon and opened the box. He was right, in that it was a ring box, and inside was the ring. The ring was a pale gold, and inset in it was a black stone, with a peculiar symbol engraved on it. A triangle, with a circle inside, and a line down the middle. James stared at it for some time – he felt like he had seen the symbol somewhere before. Gingerly, he pulled it from the box, and from there he could see another note tucked underneath it in the box. He pulled that out too and unravelled it, to see familiar, tiny handwriting scrawled across the parchment.

Prongs,

I am in grave danger, and I'm risking everything to contact you. I know I don't deserve it, but I am begging you to help me. Please find me at 'our girl' tomorrow night at moonrise. Tell no one, and bring this ring. I know you don't see it, but I am forever your friend

– Wormtail.

James looked up from the note, all at once horrified and elated. He felt sick to his stomach. He hadn't heard from Peter since half way through the last school year, when he had run away to join the Death Eaters, and each time the boy's name was mentioned a horrible awkward tension would settle over the Marauders. But... if this note was true, if Peter was trying to get back in contact, did that mean he was ditching the Death Eaters? He was asking James for help... how could James say no?

Wormtail

James had used the floo-powder and the fireplace in his mother's bedroom to connect to the fireplace in Gryffindor common room, and had told no one of his departure from Godric's Hollow, or his arrival at Hogwarts. He'd taken the invisibility cloak and had it wrapped securely around him, even as he span and whooshed out of the fireplace in the common room. A scrawny first year who had chosen to stay at school over the holidays screamed as the fire rushed upwards, but then looked around confusedly as it died back down, and seemingly nothing else had happened.

"Everything okay, Julia?" Called a tall boy from across the room, and James glanced up to see it was their seventh year prefect, Tony Astalis. Julia, the first year, nodded after a moment, and settled back on the sofa with her book, and James picked his way, invisible, across the empty room, and over to the portrait hole.

His first issue was that, if he wished to remain undetected, he needed a diversion. The room was empty, save for Julia and Tony, and they would surely noticed if the portrait swung open and shut again without anyone appearing or leaving. Deftly, James produced his wand from his pocket and aimed it at a large bookcase which took up most of the far wall.

"Bombarda." He whispered under his breath, and watched as the bookcase exploded outwards in an angry and loud burst. Julia screamed again, and this time Tony joined her.

In the chaos, James resolutely reflected he was probably getting way too good at blowing things up (he really was sorry about how many times he'd exploded his dad's potions cabinet), and then he took the opportunity to escape out the portrait hole. The fat lady called out after him, sounding confused as to why she had swung open for thin air, but he hurried along the corridor, keeping his footsteps light. It was well past curfew, and despite his invisibility, he was always wary of Filch's cat ambushing him.

He swiftly made his way down the castle, taking every short-cut he knew – ducking behind tapestries and coming back out three floors down, and sliding down bannisters when the occasion called for it – and then out into the grounds. The air was bitter, and James was glad for the extra layer of the cloak. He pulled it even tighter around him, and berated himself for what felt like the millionth time that day. He shouldn't be here. It was a trap. Peter was tricking him.

But what if Peter wasn't tricking him? What if this was the only opportunity he'd ever get to get his friend back? He'd missed Wormtail terribly – more than he had at first thought possible. Peter had always been there with a quickly thought of excuse, he was a voice of down to earth reason who always seemed to just understand why things were important or not. He was the one that made the rest of the Marauders stick close-knit, and talk out their issues when they needed it.

And all of that had been replaced with a hollow emptiness, since he had disappeared half way through the last school year. It had been replaced with awkward tension and silences whenever Peter's name was mentioned. It had all been replaced with anger and resentment over the boys betrayal. But... but James had to opportunity to bring their friend, to bring Wormtail, back home.

How could he pass it up?

He walked briskly across the snow covered grounds, letting his feet do the thinking. He knew the path off by heart, and felt strangely nostalgic to be under the invisibility cloak, on a full moon, towards the Whomping Willow.

He spared a brief thought to the ceremony Remus and Sirius would currently be undertaking. Moonrise was just a few minutes away – the boys would be knee-deep in whatever Severus had planned for them now. His stomach clenched with worry as he remembered that the last time anyone had tried to remove a mating mark, someone had died... He should be there. But he had to trust Severus, to trust Remus and Sirius, that the three of them knew what they were doing – because for now, he had to focus on Peter.

He stopped, and pulled off his cloak, folding it neatly over his arm, just outside the range of Willow. Some time ago the Marauder's had stopped thinking of her as a tree – and had dropped the words 'The Whomping' from her title, labelling her as just 'Willow'. She was such a part of their lives, and to them, she had a very distinct, if a little prickly, personality. To them, she had been a fifth Marauder – just as much a part of their mischief. She had come to Hogwarts the same year as them, and she knew all the secrets they knew. She had become their girl.

If Peter had meant anywhere by his attempt at a cryptic clue, he had meant here.

He looked left and right as if Peter might materialise out of thin air, and then jumped a little as he actually did. James schooled himself gently – Peter had obviously been hiding out in rat form – and had transformed back to a boy when he saw James appear. He looked thinner than when James had last seen him – his hair had grown slightly, and that too was thinner. His robes were shabby, his nails were bitten down, and he had dark rings under his eyes.

James felt himself getting entirely too emotional at the sight, and stepped backwards, if only to stop himself from rushing forward and wrapping his friend in a bear hug. He reminded himself that Peter had run away, had joined the Death Eaters – there could be some evil plot behind this meeting, and James wouldn't be doing himself any favours if he showed himself to be an emotional wreck.

"Prongs." Peter greeted, and James' lip quivered slightly at the sound of his friend's voice, but he faked a cough to cover it with his hand and used the opportunity to scold himself back to control.

"Wormtail." He said back, proud that at least his voice had come out without a wobble. "I came as asked." He added, when Peter just stared at him. Peter seemed to shake himself out of whatever spell he had been under, and nodded, clearing his throat.

"Did you bring the ring?"

James nodded, taking the ring out of his pocket to prove it. He had raked his brains the entire night before, and most of that day, trying to figure out where he had seen the strange symbol etched on the stone before, but he'd come up short, and now his curiosity was threatening to bubble over. Peter was staring at the stone somewhere between awe and terror, and the whole thing was putting James on edge. The two of them stared at each other for some time, neither willing to break the tension that had sprung up between them, and then they both began talking, rushed and pitched, at the same time.

"What is it, Wormtail? Why did I need it?"

"Prongs, you have to help me! He'll kill me otherwise!"

James bit his lip and swallowed heavily, registering his friend's words, and after a second of stunned silence, he flopped heavily to the ground, and puffed out a breath of air.

"What's going on, Pete?"

Peter settled down next to him, leaning his back against the knot on the base of the Willow, so that she wouldn't come back to life and start attacking them. He stared out across the grounds to the castle, and waved a hand at the ring James was still holding.

"It's like this initiation thing... The Dark Lord gave all the youngest members these items. He didn't tell us what they were – just that they were important, and he wanted them protected." He began to explain. "He wanted us to do it so that even he didn't know all the details of where each one was, or how they were protected. And... and it's supposed to be us proving ourselves. Putting it in a locked room is never going to do. But... but I don't have any ideas, or know any powerful spells. He'll... he'll kill me if he finds out I haven't done as asked."

James listened in silence to the explanation, disgust brewing inside of him.

"So... you want me to do it for you? Like... like helping with your homework?" He clarified. "This is ridiculous Wormtail! I'm not doing anything that could help that bastard gain more power or hurt more people. I... dammit Pete! Why? Why did you join him?"

Peter was looking anywhere but at James. He shrugged his shoulders gently, which only made James more angry, but then he spoke quietly.

"I'm not like the rest of the Marauders. We've always known that. I wasn't sporty, or smart, or ridiculously good-looking. I went along with the pranks, but I never masterminded one. I was riding on your coattails from day one." He explained. "I'm not saying I didn't feel like belonged, because I did, you guys went out of your way to make sure I was included... but then things started changing. Remus got that crush on Regulus, Sirius was making moves on Lily, and you... fuck, you went and started shagging Snape, for Merlin's sake! I mean, if anything was going to suggest that the times were changing, it was you shacking up with our worst nightmare!"

James coughed in protest at the commentary on his love-life, but remembered that since Pete hadn't been around for over a year, he wouldn't realise that things had massively progressed since James' had developed his crush on the Slytherin.

"We're growing up, Pete." He said, instead. "Rivalries get laid to rest, people fall in love."

Peter nodded.

"And friendships get forgotten." He added. He held up a hand when James went to protest, and carried on. "The Marauders were drifting apart, and if I wasn't part of the Marauders then... then I wasn't anything. You can't understand that, because you're the sporty one. You have Quidditch. I didn't have anything outside of the Marauders, and so when Narcissa Black started talking to me, started making me feel special, and telling me that if the Marauders ever broke apart, she had a new group ready to welcome me with open arms, it sounded really nice."

James huffed.

"But they're Death Eaters, Pete! They hurt people! They've killed people!"

Peter nodded.

"I know. I know that in my head, but they're also very charismatic, and what they promise you when you sign up isn't 'we're going to kill all the muggle-borns', it's... 'here's a group that's looking out for your interests'." He explained. "It's only after you've pledged yourself in that what they really expect of you comes to light."

James shuddered.

"Have you... have you hurt people?"

Peter didn't look at him.

"I've done what I need to do to survive." He responded, making James feel faintly sick.

The Quidditch captain played with the ring in his hands, turning it over to see the odd triangular symbol from different angles. It was heavy, and clumsily made, but the black stone in the middle was almost ethereal and dangerous looking. James put it down to being an item belonging to Voldemort.

"I can't help you." He decided. "I can barely understand your reasons – there's no way I could help Him do anything."

Peter stood in a rush, and so James followed suit. Before he knew it, Peter had thrown himself at James and buried his head in James shoulder, sobbing and pleading.

"Oh Prongs, please! You have to! He'll kill me! I swear, I've seen the error of my ways, but I need you to do this for me!"

James stiffened.

"If you know it's wrong then defect – come back to our side."

"He'll kill me!"

"We can hide you."

"He'll find me! You have no idea what he's capable of! James, I swear... I have. I am good. I can... I can be useful to you! I can be a spy!"

James felt his hands shaking, trying to hold up his friend, who was still clutching on to him. He shook his head a little, not realising what he was doing.

"How can I believe that?" He asked.

Peter wailed.

"I have information. I swear it. These items... Lucius Malfoy has one; a diary. Bellatrix and Rudolphus Lestrage have a golden goblet. Regulus Black has a locket, and I got given the ring."

James frowned at him.

"Regulus...?" He repeated. The boy who was sharing a room with his best friend and his lover, was a Death Eater? Did Sirius know about this?

Peter nodded.

"I can give you so much more information. Together we can try and bring him down from the inside... but before then I have to gain his trust – I have to protect this ring." He pushed.

James could feel the cold weight of it in his hand. His mouth felt dry and he couldn't stop staring at Peter. Was there really a chance that he could get Wormtail back? That Pete would atone for the last year by becoming a spy; feeding them information? And all James had to do to achieve it was put a protection on this ring.

It didn't seem like such a bad deal.

He placed the ring on the grass and pulled out his wand. He wasn't sure what his plan was, until it came to him, in a flash of memory. When he had first contracted Cinis, he had been doing as much research as possible, and had looked in the library under 'death by fire', and found instead a powerful dark curse – death by venom.

He pointed his wand at the ring and took a deep breath, channelling all the anger and upset he had been feeling over Peter's betrayal, and then pushing that energy out through his wand.

"Venenimortem." He said, and a horrible green light slithered forth from his wand tip, reminding him of a snake made entirely out of the green light of the killing curse, and wrapped itself around the ring on the ground. It shone brightly for a moment, and then dulled down until the ring just looked like a ring again.

Peter bent to retrieve it, but James pushed him away.

"Don't touch it. It's dangerous now." He explained. Pete produced a handkerchief from his pocket and raised an eyebrow at James, so James nodded. "Yeah." He said, and watched as Wormtail picked up the ring with the cloth. He folded it up and put it in his pocket.

"Where did you learn that curse?" He asked. James bit his lip. Wormtail shrugged. "What does it do?" He asked instead.

"It kills you, rapidly, with poison." He responded. "Wear it or touch it for too long and it will activate it."

Peter nodded gravely and then turned to leave.

"Prongs." He nodded. James frowned.

"Wait, you need to come back and see the rest of the Marauders." He protested. Peter turned back to James with a raised eyebrow, and then a horrid smirk grew on his lips that made James' stomach lurch uncomfortably. When the rat animagus next spoke, his voice was no longer worried or desperate, but cold and calculated.

"You've always been the one who wanted to see the best in people, Prongs. Another word for it is gullible."

And with that, he turned back into a rat and was gone from James' sight.

The Ritual

Sirius stood, waist deep, in the near freezing waters of the lake near the Potter's cottage. The water was churning around him and the sun was beginning to set in the sky. He wrapped his arms around his bare chest, feeling naked and exposed, which he supposed came from the fact that he was standing, very much naked, in a lake, on a full-moon, with an as-yet-unchanged werewolf standing about seven metres away at the waters edge.

He mind reminded him that Remus would never hurt him, even fully wolfed-out. They were *mates*.

"Why are we doing this in a lake?" Remus had asked, and Severus gave a long-suffering sigh, like their questions had obvious answers.

"It's always best to do these things in water." He explained. "The Water Element is healing, so any side-affects of the ceremony can be somewhat negated by the water. It's one of the reasons the last people who tried this died – they were never going to succeed because they started the ritual on land."

Sirius had to admit that went some way to calming him down. He curled his toes in the water and reminded himself he didn't want to be mated with Remus any longer, that the risks would surely be worth it.

He hadn't given too much thought to what being mates with Remus actually meant, not since before the holidays had begun. Since then the two of them had just been caught up in a whirlwind of emotions and lust, and Sirius had just been giving in to his base instinct to be a good little wife to his mate; to love and care for Remus and receive love and care from him in turn. Plus... the sex had been insanely good – aggressive, passionate affairs that left Sirius bruised and sore, but aching for it all over again.

Seeing Lily had been a flux in the honeymoon period – the logical part of his brain, the part that loved his red-headed girlfriend and was screaming at him that he shouldn't be shacking up with his friend, had pined for her the entire time she had been at the cottage. The other part, the part that was perfectly happy being Remus' mate, had barely registered her presence, and had been only focused on Moony.

That was how Sirius felt now – entirely focused on Moony. He'd been taking his antidotes nightly since Snape had first told him too, and each day he had felt less connected to the werewolf, but now his heart physically hurt from the idea of being separated from his mate. A chilling idea that if he was still so emotionally invested in Remus, then the antidotes hadn't been working, crossed his mind, but he tried to push it down. A sob, however, broke free, and he noted, because he was so focused on Remus, that his friend had moved slightly at the sound.

"Stay where you are." Snape commanded, however, and in that moment Sirius hated him. This was the man that was separating him from Moony – this was the man who was stopping his mate from coming to him. All would be well again if he could just get Remus to him – if he could feel Moony's scarred skin against his own. More sobs broke forth from him and he covered his face with his hands, as Snape turned his attention to him. "Remember, the heartbreak you're feeling is created by that mark. You don't actually love Lupin, you don't need him to come look after you."

Sirius very much disagreed with this. Having Remus come look after him felt like the only thing he needed, but he nodded – because logically he knew he had agreed to this – he had wanted this.

Oh God, why had he wanted this?

"Why does it hurt so much?" He asked. Severus waded into the water and stopped by his side, his clothes going sodden. Sirius suddenly felt glad the his own nakedness was mostly covered by the choppy water and fading sun.

"It's just the mark's last ditch attempt to keep you together. It's a good thing, it means the antidotes have been working and the mark knows this ritual might work."

Sirius gulped down the pain and nodded, trying to wipe away the tears, because a little voice in the back of his head, which sounded very much like the Sirius he had been before he had developed Remus' mating symbol, told him he shouldn't let Snape see him crying.

"Moons getting up. We don't have much time." Called Remus from the waters edge, looking worried.

Snape nodded in response, pulling a phial of clear liquid from his pocket.

"I need you to draw some Runes on me, just follow my instructions, okay?" He asked, shrugging out of his jacket and shirt and letting them pool in the water. He stood with his top bare, watching Sirius expectantly, and shivering slightly. Sirius rose an eyebrow, but shrugged, nodding his assent. He dipped his fingers into the offered phial and the moon-dew stuck to them like honey. Snape swallowed, almost nervously. "Start with 'healer', on my forehead." He advised.

Sirius was suddenly glad Remus had talked him in to sticking with Ancient Runes as a subject. He'd agreed to take it alongside his werewolf friend in third year, and had almost dropped it because he'd found it entirely too boring – but Remus had begged him to stick with it. Now, as his fingers traced out the lines and curves of the rune on Snape's forehead, he was grateful for the knowledge. He listened as Severus instructed him through the next symbols. 'Control', between his collar-bones; 'Deceit' on his chest, over his heart; 'moon' on his left shoulder; and 'transference' on his right. Then Snape seemed to colour slightly, although it was difficult to see in the fading light.

"The next is 'the thief', over my lips, if you will." He explained.

Feeling weird and strangely intimate, Sirius coated his fingers once more and brushed them over Snape's lips, tracing out the rune with practised ease. He'd been trying to figure out what all the symbols meant, but so far he'd come up short. He'd just have to trust that Snape knew what he was doing.

When he was done Snape took back the phial and dunked his own fingers in the sticky moon-dew.

"I'm going to draw some Runes on you now." He explained, and waited for Sirius to confirm he'd heard before beginning.

He pressed his fingers to the base of Sirius' neck, between his collar-bones, and began to draw. He drew the rune for 'poison' there, and then, underneath, just above his belly-button, he drew the rune for 'healing'. He dipped his fingers in the moon-dew again, and then delicately placed them to Sirius' lips and spelt out the rune for 'possession'. Then he carefully turned Sirius around and drew 'moon' at the top of his spine. Lower, he traced out 'destiny' and then lower again he drew 'illusion'. Finally he drew one more on Sirius spine, so low it was being lapped at by the water, and this one was 'transference'.

"This next one is going to hurt." Snape warned, dipping his fingers in the moon-dew again. He lifted them to Sirius' neck, and directly over the mark he drew 'the scythe'.

For a moment all Sirius felt was tingling, the kind he often felt whenever the mark was touched, and he flushed in shame that his body was getting aroused from Snape touching him – even if it was only a reaction to his mating mark being touched. He tried to focus in on what Snape was drawing - the Scythe, which represented a cut, or break. It was used most commonly to break curses, and Sirius assumed in this case it was being used to break his bond with Remus. His stomach lurched uncomfortably at the idea of their bond being broken, but he reminded himself once more that it was only the mark making him feel that way. Then, as soon as Snape had finished the last swipe of his fingers over his mark, a fire seemed to burst forth from there, and he yelped in pain, clutching at his neck.

The burning did not relent, and within seconds Sirius was hissing and clutching at Snape, who was hushing him gently.

"It will pass." He reassured, sounding awkward, but not unkind.

Sirius clutched on to the man's sleeves, gritting his teeth against the pain, and then, as quickly as it had started, the pain subsided, and Sirius was left panting and aching dully. He quickly let go of Snape's arms and straightened up, opening his mouth to explain himself. But in that moment Remus called out, sounding shaky.

"It's happening. Severus you need to leave!"

Sirius watched as Severus hesitated, staring at where Remus was stood by the side of the lake, and then pushed on his shoulder roughly.

"Go!" He commanded.

It was the first time Remus would be transforming in the open. Godric's Hollow was almost entirely a Wizard's only community and magic played out here in every day lives. As such, Snape had relied on the idea that the Ministry would not be able to trace any under-age magic specifically to him and had warded the lake and surrounding area fairly heavily – but it occurred to Sirius that Snape was only sixteen – that his wards might easily break under the strength of a werewolf. Now, he panicked, as Snape turned back to him and said:

"I need to stay."

"Remus wont know you're a friend. He'll hurt you." Sirius tried to explain, pushing at Severus again.

Snape just caught his wrist and shook his head, and no more could be said on the matter because at that point they heard a sickening crack and Remus' scream of pain as his bones broke themselves and began transforming him into the wolf. Sirius watched, slack-jawed. It was the first time he had seen Remus' transformation – the boy had always been insistent they wait until after he was fully wolfed-out, and then come to him in their animagus forms – and the sight was truly terrifying. His body twisted and bent in ways it shouldn't have been able to, all the while accompanied by Remus screaming and writhing in pain. Fur sprouted from his skin, his eyes turning yellow and canine, and his teeth and nails elongated until finally, a wolf stood where Remus had once stood, panting, and teeth bared.

Sirius pushed Snape behind him, as if somehow he might be able to protect the Slytherin, but that only caused movement which alerted Moony to their presence. The wolf span, eyes locking on the two boys in the lake, and he stared at them for a moment, head cocked, as if trying to figure out why two humans would be stupid enough to be out in the open on a full-moon. Sirius reminded himself once more of all the reading he'd done, that Moony should instinctively know not to hurt

him, because they were mates – but that did nothing for Snape.

Then Moony ducked his head and began bounding towards them, through the water. Sirius turned to push Snape away – to get in between his mate and this idiotic man who he knew he should protect, if only for James sake – and as Moony came crashing at them, Snape did something Sirius had never imagined the Slytherin would do in a million years.

He kissed Sirius.

The whole world seemed to stop the second Severus' lips pressed against Sirius'. Remus, for definite, had stopped in his chase, and was staring at the other two boys in shock and confusion. Sirius imagined that as soon as his werewolf brain had caught up with the fact that someone else was kissing his mate, he would go on a murderous rampage, but for now he seemed frozen. Sirius himself was frozen too, shocked and internally freaking out. He was being kissed, by his worst nightmare! And then Severus moved his lips slightly against Sirius, and the Gryffindor realised he was muttering a spell whilst keeping them connected by their lips, and something about that had him flushing slightly and had his eyes fluttering closed. Snape snaked an arm around Sirius' waist and gently pressed his fingers into the small of his back, and in that moment the magic Severus had been pouring into the runes finally activated, and Sirius' felt a rush of power go through him that all at once made him feel stronger than he had done in months, and weak at the knees.

The knees, it seemed, won out, because the next second Snape had to all but catch him. The Slytherin broke their lip-lock as he did, and Sirius opened his eyes, suddenly feeling incredibly foolish for closing them. He straightened himself up and cleared his throat, trying to look anywhere but at Snape and still acutely aware there was a werewolf a few metres from them.

He turned in a panic to see Remus only a foot away from them, sniffing at the air, and looking annoyed, but not murderous.

"He won't hurt us. He's smelling the moon-dew and he thinks we're werewolves too. He's confused as to why we don't look like wolves, but by drawing the 'moon' symbol we've confused him enough to warn off an attack, for now."

Sirius stared back at Snape's explanation, dumbfounded. That seemed like a plan that could go wrong in so many ways – and he was still reeling from the fact that Snape had kissed him, and had yet to explain why.

"Um..." He said, feeling completely inelegant and embarrassed. Snape spared him a glance.

"Go to Remus, touch him." He instructed.

Sirius felt like that was a completely stupid idea, but a small part of his brain, the part that was still Remus' mate, told him it was fine, so he waded the foot between himself and Moony and buried his hands in the wolf's fur. Remus whined slightly at the feeling, nuzzling gently at Sirius, who found himself nuzzling back, trying to get closer. Neither of them noticed Snape coming up behind them, two wrapped up in each other to care, and the first they knew of any plans Snape might have for them, was Snape's teeth sinking into Sirius' neck.

The reaction was instantaneous, Sirius screamed in pain, both at the piercing of his skin, and the fire of the scythe ripping away his bond. Remus reeled backwards, howling and splashing in the water, and the fire that was running from Sirius' neck seemed to entirely consume him as Snape pulled away, and wiped his mouth on his forearm, grimacing. Sirius spotted the blood there and cried out, pushing through the water to get to Snape – to cause him some harm.

Yet, the second he touched Snape, with the intent of punching the bastard, he lost all his strength.

"What have you done?" He asked, feeling faint, and scared, and in pain. Snape shook his head sorrowfully.

"We need to go, I'll explain later." He said, tugging on Sirius to lead him out of the water. Sirius followed, sobbing gently against the pain and feeling heartbroken all over again. They made it to the edge of the lake just as Remus seemed to come to his senses, and the werewolf rounded on them again, this time looking like he was ready to kill. As soon as they reached land Severus pulled Sirius close to him in an awkward hug and with a loud crack they were gone from the lake.

"Did you just Apparate?" Asked a surprised voice as they crash landed in James' bedroom back at the Potter's cottage, which was a valid question, because Severus was only sixteen and shouldn't have been able to Apparate, but also seemed entirely too simple a question to ask two boys who had just appeared in your bedroom, one shirtless and one entirely naked, bleeding from the neck.

"Yes." Severus confirmed. "I learnt from Kindhall." He added, but offered no further explanation.

James moved aside as Severus bundled Sirius on to a bed and knelt down beside him. Sirius was bleeding quite a lot from the neck, and James was just wondering whether he should go get a first aid kit, when Severus waved his wand and the wound healed.

"That's a lot of under-age magic." James mumbled, but he knew, like most pureblood kids, that the Ministry would have no way of tracing that magic to Severus – they would only know a healing charm had been used in Godric's Hollow, which probably happened all the time. He felt sick to the stomach, glad he had managed to return before Severus and Sirius had, if only by a couple of minutes. He had floo'd into his mother's bedroom and crossed the hall, only to hear the loud crack and have the boys materialise in front of him. He didn't know how he was going to begin to explain what had happened with Peter, but he had to focus on what his friends had been up to first.

Sirius pushed himself up on to the pillows, wincing and crying heavily. He seemed panicked as he said:

"Remus?"

"He will be okay." Snape replied, then he looked to James and said: "Take your clothes off."

"Excuse me?" James squeaked, watching incredulously as Severus stood and began unbuttoning his sodden trousers. The Slytherin talked fast as he undressed.

"He needs body temperature to counteract the affects of the separation." He explained. "Skin on skin from people who have bonds with him is the best counter for this."

As soon as he was naked he crawled on to the bed with Sirius and crowded the Gryffindor into his arms. Sirius curled into him, still crying gently, and James felt himself burn with jealousy at the sight, even as he flushed heavily and began stripping. He dropped his clothes to the floor and piled himself on to the bed, pushing up against Sirius' back, who whimpered slightly and lulled his head back so James was breathing against his neck. Sirius shivered in between them, but after a moment his crying stopped and his breathing evened out to be less panicked.

A few minutes later the boy said, voice impossibly quiet:

"Why... why did you kiss me?"

James felt himself stiffen at the words and shot Severus a look over Sirius' shoulder. The Slytherin looked awkward and annoyed at the question, but when he spoke it was in the soft, gentle voice that he used with James when he was allowing himself to be affectionate. This only served to make James more annoyed.

"In order for the ritual to work your bond with Remus needed to be broken. There is only one way of doing that – for a stronger wolf to 'steal' you from him whilst you are touching him. But all that does is bind you to someone else. What I did was pretend to be another wolf and I stole you from Remus." He explained.

James couldn't help himself.

"You did what?" He asked, but Severus gave him a look which told him very clearly to keep quiet, so he did – feeling resentful.

"I used the moon-dew to create the illusion that we were wolves, and to create the basis for a bond between us. Which is where the Runes like 'transference' 'thief' and 'possession' came in to it. The kiss was part of the spell to create a bond between us because we didn't have the luxury of us actually getting to know each other." Severus continued to speak. He rubbed gentle circles on Sirius' arm as he spoke and James watched it angrily, but Sirius was sighing and pushing back to get as much skin contact as possible.

"So, we're bonded now? Like... me and Remus were?" Sirius asked, sounding confused, and also a little resigned. Severus snorted in amusement.

"I really hope not." He replied, and he locked eyes with James over Sirius' shoulder. "I took the risk that because I'm not a wolf the mark wouldn't take. So it would break down your bond with Remus, but couldn't rebuild with me – which is why you're dealing with separation after-effects." He explained.

James let out a breath he hadn't realise he'd been holding. He was beginning to understand why Severus had been so secretive about what the ceremony would entail – there was no way any of them would have agreed to this, but he couldn't deny it had achieved results. He looked down at Sirius, who was staring in to space, still squirming slightly to get as much contact as possible. James shifted slightly, pressing his chest against his friends back.

"How long should we stay like this?" He asked, feeling awkward and uncomfortably warm.

"Probably all night." Severus replied. "Best to try and sleep through it. We'll see how he reacts to Remus when he gets back here in the morning, then we'll know whether it's worked fully."

James bit his lip, but nodded, wrapping his arm more tightly around Sirius and brushing his fingers against Severus on the boys other side. Severus returned the favour, looping his arm over Sirius' hip and resting his hand on James' hip instead. Sirius breathed contentedly in their hold.

James closed his eyes, pressing his nose to the back of Sirius' ear, but keeping his eyes on Severus.

Oh, it was going to be a long night.

Regulus' Secret

Remus returned to the Potter Cottage early in the morning, when the moon had finally made it's way across the sky and the sun was just beginning to peep over the horizon. He felt more tired than he had ever done after a transformation, and he hadn't been able to find his trousers, which had lead to him sneaking back through Godric's Hollow in just his t-shirt and pants. He'd apparently spent most of the night swimming, as well, because he was freezing cold, tired to the bone and smelt faintly of wet dog.

He arrived at the cottage and made his way around the back, climbing the tree outside James' window, ready to knock on the glass and get his friend to let him in. When he managed to clamber up the branches though, he peered in through the glass to see an incredibly surprising sight. James and Severus were crowding Sirius in a very tight, very naked cuddle – all three of them apparently fast asleep.

He felt his jaw drop at the sight, and then instantly tried to collect himself. He leant forward and tapped on the window, and then did it again a little louder when no one stirred. The second time roused James from his sleep, and the Quidditch Captain untangled himself from the naked three-way and grabbed a pair of joggers from the floor, pulling them on as he made his way to the window to let Remus in.

Remus slid through the window with his eyebrows high and a pointed look on his face.

"It's really not what it looks like." James excused. "Something about skin-contact being good for separation after-affects? I dunno... do you feel like you need a hug?"

Remus snorted amusedly.

"I'm okay thanks mate." He replied, stifling a yawn. All he really wanted to do was curl up in a ball and sleep for the next three weeks, but he shot Sirius' naked form a look, noting how incredibly odd it was to see he and Severus Snape curled up in each other and seemingly perfectly content. "Is he okay?" He asked.

James shrugged.

"He was pretty bad last night, but he's been sleeping for a good few hours now." He explained. "Sev filled me on everything that happened. I'm glad neither of you are... you know... dead."

Remus smirked.

"I thought for a second last night that I might have died, when Severus broke the bond – it was the most painful thing I've ever experienced, and I literally break my own bones every month." He replied. "Then I guess I just stayed in the water. It has healing properties, apparently... so it must have gone some way to soothing the heartbreak."

James hummed low in his throat.

"The bond is broken though, right?" He asked. "You don't have any particular urges to have your wicked way with Pads?"

Remus looked back to the boy on the bed; specifically at the boys neck, where his initials had once shone black against his pale skin. There was still a mark there, but it was just a bruise from the rough treatment Sirius had received last night, no more initials; no more mating bond. If there had

still been a bond Remus supposed he would have been very jealous of what he was seeing – he would most likely rip Sirius from Snape's clutches, take him upstairs and show him exactly who he belonged to – but he had no desire to do that now.

"I think it's definitely broken, yeah." He agreed. He didn't yet take his eyes from Sirius, because it wasn't as if he hadn't seen the boy naked plenty before, and his sleeping form was softer than his usual confident self. His skin seemed impossibly paler, and his hair was curlier, from the water of the lake. He seemed small and delicate, lying in the bed with Severus' arms around him, and he reminded Remus very much of his little brother.

James had pulled on a t-shirt and was holding out some trousers for Remus, who took them gratefully, and then pulled them on. Whilst he was changing James shook Severus awake, and Remus was able to witness what was probably the funniest thing he had seen in months.

Severus woke slowly and groggily, at first clutching tighter to Sirius, who sighed contentedly, and then when the Slytherin had properly opened his eyes he stiffened and quickly pushed Sirius away, yelling.

"What the fuck?" He asked loudly, rousing Sirius from his sleep. A second later Snape seemed to catch up with himself and pushed a hand against his forehead angrily. "Right, of course. Separation Therapy." He reminded himself, and then quickly stood from the bed, searching for clothes as Sirius blinked blearily at the ceiling and Remus and James tried to stifle their laughs.

After a moment, Sirius sat up in bed, seemingly entirely unconcerned he was now the only naked person in the room. He looked around and his eyes settled on Remus. He grinned.

"Hey Sugar-Muffin, you look like shit. We're not mates any more so I only have one thing to say." He began, and then paused for effect, still grinning. Just when Remus thought he might not actually say his next words he said: "Please go make it up with Reggie, the boys a bitch when he's pining."

Remus' heart skipped a beat, then he began to smile as well, shaking his head ruefully.

"Put on some clothes." He finally responded, then: "I don't think Regulus wants to talk to me right now."

Sirius stood from the bed in all his naked glory, then rummaged through James' draws and pulled out some items to borrow, pulling them over his skin and patting them down, frowning.

"Damn James, you really are tiny." He mumbled.

"Fuck you." James replied, "I think I was plenty big enough for you last night."

A short, very awkward silence filled the room in which James and Sirius both flushed heavily and James suddenly became very interested in the window latch, and then Sirius valiantly ignored any unmeant innuendos that could have been taken from James' words and picked up his conversation with Remus again. James dragged Severus over to a corner of the bedroom to give them some semblance of privacy.

"Regulus is only this mad because he really likes you and he hates that he had to share you, especially with me." He told his friend. "I literally hate the idea of anyone dating my brother but if he's going to do it behind my back anyway, then I suppose I would want that to be with you. I mean, I know first hand how good you are..." He trailed off, flushing. "As in, how nice you are... to those you're... involved with."

Remus couldn't help but smirk slightly, no matter how Sirius tried to avoid it, he knew that mark or

no, Sirius still thought he was good in bed, and that was a big confidence boost.

"I don't even know how to begin to apologise to him." He confessed. Sirius shrugged in response.

"You just need to explain to him how much he means to you. Tell him how you can't even compare us because he's everything you could ever want and sun shines out his ass, and I'm annoying, childish and the worst lay you've ever had. Oh, and mention how ugly you think I am, all that stuff."

Remus frowned.

"But I don't think you're ugly. You and Regulus are very similar looking people." He replied, making Sirius snort in amusement. "Besides, Andrew Fortescue was the worst shag I've ever had."

This made Sirius laugh properly, but he shook his head and pushed on Remus' shoulders, moving him towards the door and out of the bedroom.

"Just tell him you love him then." He pushed, giggling as he opened the door to shove Remus out. He did so with great gusto, flinging him out into the hall in a move that if Remus had put any effort into holding his ground would not have budged the werewolf at all. As if was, Remus allowed himself to be pushed and was flung directly into the subject of their conversation.

"Oh, Regulus!" He gasped, suddenly feeling ridiculous in his borrowed trousers and last night's top and very aware he probably still smelt like wet dog and Regulus had most likely just heard his older brother telling Remus to declare his love.

He felt his ears heat up and looked down at his toes, peeping out under his borrowed trousers.

"Lupin." Replied Regulus, looking grumpy.

Sirius took one look between them, mouthed "Tell him!" at Remus, and then closed the door again, leaving Remus alone with his ex.

Sirius closed the door, and then instantly went to put his ear up against it to find out what they were saying. James, who had been watching out of the corner of his eye, whilst trying to look like he couldn't care less what was going on between his friends, rolled his eyes and then dragged Padfoot away from the bedroom door, pulling him back towards the bed.

"You're such a gossip." He admonished, and then ignored Sirius as his friend tried to protest that James was too, so it shouldn't matter. "Look, I actually have something to tell you." He said, feeling very much like a gossip and also feeling faintly sick with guilt.

Sirius must have noted his worry, because he adopted a sensible expression and said:

"What's up, man?"

James worried his lower lip, trying to stop himself from pacing. He glanced over to where Severus was stood, tying his hair back in the mirror, and allowed himself to feel calmer from his lover's presence.

"I... when you were all getting rid of the mark last night I... I went back to Hogwarts via floo. I... I met with Peter."

As James had thought would happen, and icy chill went through the air. Sirius was staring at him

like he'd declared that he himself was joining Voldemort, and Severus had stopped playing with his hair, letting it drop back down in lanky curtains around his face as he made his way over to the group.

"Why would you do that?" Sirius finally asked. James frowned.

"He contacted me. Asked for help... he said he was planning on betraying You-Know-Who. Said he could be like a spy." He tried to excuse, then he sighed. "He lied to me though."

"I could have told you that! The guys a rat-bastard!" Sirius huffed, then, gentler: "What did he want?"

James frowned.

"He said You-Know-Who had these objects he wanted his followers to protect. He had a ring. He asked me to find a way to protect it."

There was a small silence, and then Severus said:

"And did you?"

James wanted to cry at the tone of his voice. It was the cold, emotionless tone Severus used when he was especially angry. James was suddenly transported back to Severus' work-room the year before, when he had been informed by Severus himself that if he ever thought James was helping Voldemort than he wouldn't hesitate to let James die.

He felt sick.

"Peter promised. He told me I just needed to do this one thing and he would spy on You-Know-Who. I was trying to gain an ally!" He gushed, trying to excuse himself. He felt panicky, and knew his words were coming out fast and high-pitched in a way that wasn't like him. "He named names and everything. I thought I was doing something that would help, I didn't know -"

James cut himself off as strong arms wrapped around him, and then he realised his whole body was shaking. Severus shushed him gently.

"It's okay." He mumbled. "You were just trying to gain back a friend."

James nodded, but it didn't really make him feel justified.

"I'd hug you too, Jamie, but I guess I should leave that up to the boyfriend." Sirius told him.

There was a short pause in which James felt Severus stiffen slightly, and he wondered whether his boyfriend was actually mad, and then he heard the Slytherin sigh.

"Fuck it." He said, and the next thing he knew Sirius was yelping as he too was bought into the hug.

"What is happening?" Sirius asked, squished up against James side. James spared a glance at Severus, who looked awkward but determined. The Slytherin answered in a stiff voice.

"I am attempting to convey that when you have spooned someone naked then you are probably something akin to friends."

James wanted to laugh; that sentence was so stiff and awkward, and yet probably the exact thing to break the ice. Sirius was staring at him, slack jawed with a small flush over his ears. Eventually,

they broke apart.

James felt some of the tension return to his body the second he had been let go of.

"I cursed it." He told them. "The ring... I used a really, really horrible curse. It was... dark magic."

He glanced once more at Severus, fearing the reaction, but Severus just shrugged.

"I firmly believe that the best way to defeat dark magic is to know what you are up against." He told James. "And if we're up against a ring that's been cursed by you, then at least we know what curse was put on it." He added.

James let out a short breath, and then turned to Sirius.

"You're brother... Peter said he was a Death Eater, that he'd been given a locket." He said. "I'm sure he was just trying to get me to play along..."

Sirius bit his lip, his grey eyes turning dark and unreadable, and then he sighed.

"No, he was telling the truth." He confessed, and then stood. "Regulus is a Death Eater, has been for some time... I've known since last year – since that time when I..."

He waved awkwardly between himself and Severus and it was obviously he was referring to the incident when he had sent Severus off to see Remus transform. Severus winced slightly, but didn't say anything. James was staring at Sirius, unable to drag his eyes away.

"Why didn't you say anything?" He asked, feeling a little incensed. Regulus had been living under their roof – Sirius had only just sent Remus off to confess his love to the boy – the Death Eater. Sirius huffed.

"Because you'd be angry, and cut him out – and that's the reason he signed up to begin with. He was lonely, and threatened, and it seemed like the easier option." He explained. "He knows it's not right, and he's looking for a way out – but you don't just tell You-Know-Who that you changed your mind, do you?"

James sat down heavily on his bed, and then Sirius huffed again.

"He's only a kid." Severus said, and they both looked to him to see he had gone very pale and was clenching his fists at his sides angrily. James, who knew how Severus felt about Voldemort, knew he would see this as a big betrayal.

"Right." Agreed Sirius. "He's only a kid and he made a mistake. He's trying to make up for it. Look... just let me talk to him. I'll see about this necklace thing, okay?"

James pursed his lips, but nodded, and Sirius made his way from the room quickly. As soon as the door shut behind him James turned to Severus, worried.

"Are you okay?" He asked. Severus looked at him, holding eye-contact, and then shrugged.

"I have a lot to think about." He confessed. "I have no wish to cut Regulus from my life – he has been a good friend to me, and he was just a child, who as Black said, made a stupid mistake. But... if I forgive Regulus this then it means..."

James hesitated.

"It means what, Sev?" He finally asked when Severus closed his eyes, furrowing his brow and

looking like he was in pain. The Slytherin sighed, and the sound conveyed a pain and anger that went way beyond his sixteen years.

"It means I had no reason, no justification for..." He paused, then sat down heavily, placing his head in his hands and looking so much older than he was, wrapped up in his woe. "If I forgive Regulus this, then I should have forgiven Alex. I allowed Alex to die with no trial, or explanation. I... I killed him."

Remus had convinced Regulus to come up stairs with him, glad it was still insanely early and Mr and Mrs Potter were still asleep. The thought crossed his mind that Regulus was up very early, but he brushed it aside, especially considering his good luck that Regulus actually seemed willing to listen to him.

They sat down on the edge of separate beds, Regulus on his own, and Remus on the end of Sirius' bed, where a few nights prior they had been going at it like bunnies. Now, that seemed ridiculous and far-fetched, and he cursed the mark for all that it was.

"I wanted to tell you how incredibly sorry I am for how this entire situation has been handled." He said, and winced at Regulus rolled his eyes. He bit his lip, but didn't let the teens anger get to him. He needed to tell Regulus how little Sirius meant, and how much Regulus truly did. "I understand you're upset with me, and that's completely justifiable. I've acted like a selfish prick. There's no excuse for cheating."

Regulus shifted slightly, looking uncomfortable.

"You said you were frustrated." He mumbled.

Remus bit his tongue.

"I was." He confessed. "But that's not your fault."

Regulus sighed, and played with a heavy looking necklace in his lap, and then he huffed and put it down on the bed next to him. As soon as he put it down some of the anger flew away from him.

"You could have asked, you know. I know I said I wouldn't have... but, I dunno... maybe I would."

Remus couldn't help a small smile.

"I wouldn't have wanted to pressure you." He said.

"Because fucking my brother is a much better option..." Regulus sat back. Remus winced once more at the words, wishing he could explain about the mark and all it had made them do. "Does Lily know the two of you are still fucking each other?"

Remus swallowed.

"We're not, any more." He mumbled. "We... look, this whole thing with Sirius and I is very complicated. We made a stupid drunken mistake last year, and since then we've been..." Remus desperately wanted to tell Regulus that they had been bonded together, to have some semblance of a reason why he had been drawn back to Sirius, when the person he really wanted was sitting in front of him. But to say all that would be to confess he was a werewolf.

"You've been fucking since last year? So what, was I the affair?"

Remus huffed, annoyed at himself for trailing off and leaving Regulus with that conclusion.

"No!" He hastily assured. "We... the two of us... well, our situation is like... It's difficult to explain." He babbled. Regulus finally looked up, and swallowed thickly.

"Is it a werewolf thing?"

"Yes." Confirmed Remus, and then his mind caught up with what was happening, and his heart stopped beating. He caught eye-contact with Regulus and held it, not daring to speak, or breath, until finally he found the courage to squeak. "What? Why would you mention werewolves?"

Regulus sighed.

"I've known... I mean, I don't think I understood what I knew back then, but I've known you were a werewolf since the day I burst into your dormitory and you helped me clean that cut I had." He explained.

Remus felt sick, wondering how this kid had jumped to a conclusion just from that. He remembered the incident in excruciating detail – it had been the first time he had truly been aware of Regulus as anything more than Sirius' little brother. It had been a few nights before the Full-Moon, and James had left him in the dorm because he could cause too much damage in a fight. Regulus had needed his cut healing and although Regulus had been studying healing spells he had suddenly become too nervous to do one, and had only cleaned it up.

"H-How?" He finally spat out. Regulus shrugged his shoulders.

"The same way when James hugged me in the charms corridor last year I knew he was sick. Or when Sirius punched me after you confessed to sleeping with him I knew that it was true." He coughed. "I've never told anyone this, but I'm really rather skilled at Divination. When I touch people I can see their pasts, or... bits of it. It's not like images, it's more like... feelings. Like when you touched me that first time, I had this sense of lunar cycles and blood-thirst. The more you touched me after that the more it all started to make sense."

Remus breathed out slowly, and then, because there really wasn't anything else to do, he laughed. Regulus looked at him like he'd gone mad.

"I'm s-sorry!" Remus laughed. "But I've been... I've been trying to keep this a secret from you for so long, and yet you already knew. The reason I've been sleeping with Sirius is because I stupidly, drunkenly left a mating mark on him last year."

Regulus looked confused, and then slowly reached out his hand.

"Do you mind?" He asked, and when Remus shook his head he pressed his fingers to the werewolf's wrist.

Remus thought he might seize up or something, like he was having a vision, but Regulus just gently closed his eyes, and stayed still for a moment, holding on to Remus' wrist. After a moment, he detached, and sighed.

"You loved him, but it was... false." He deducted. "There was instincts, and desire... but... it's not there any more. I thought mating marks were for life."

Remus went to explain how it had been removed, but then stopped short when Sirius burst into the room, looking dazed.

"You told him?" He asked. Remus rose an eyebrow, and then Regulus stood, and placed a hand on his brother's chest.

"I already knew." He explained.

Sirius looked at his younger sibling, bewildered.

"Oh really, you already knew that..."

"Remus is a werewolf, yes."

The eldest Black flopped down heavily on a bed and puffed out a breath of air.

"How?" He asked, and Regulus, begrudgingly, explained. Sirius gave a low whistle once his brother was done with his explanation, and Regulus squirmed slightly. "Like Great-Aunt Cassiopeia." He said.

Regulus nodded, folding his arms over his chest.

"I never said anything because Auntie Cas always got mocked for it by mum, but I've had this ability my whole life. I mostly gage things about the past, when I touch people, but I can also divine into the future... sometimes. It's not very reliable." He explained, frowning. Then he bit his lip. "I wouldn't have said anything now, except..."

He glanced at the necklace he'd been fiddling with, lying innocently on the bed, and then went over and picked it up. When Sirius saw it, he frowned.

"I came up to talk to you about that." He mumbled, and Regulus nodded.

"I know." He replied, and those two words held a lot more weight now that they knew of the abilities Regulus had. "It's not just a necklace. When I touched it I could feel the evil running through it, and now I finally know a way to make up for my mistakes."

Remus coughed, feeling confused.

"I don't understand, what is it?" He asked. Regulus held out the necklace in front of him, and took a deep, steadying breath.

"This is one of The Dark Lord's Horcruxes."

Heist

Planning a heist against the world's most powerful and evil wizard wasn't something to be taken lightly, but apparently, that was exactly what Regulus planned to do. They boys had all gathered in the attic room crowded on metal-framed beds and staring incredulously at the youngest member of their group as he paced back and forth and explained the events that had led to him holding on to a piece of Voldemort's soul.

It boiled down to Regulus' special divination powers alerting him to what the necklace actually was, and how he had been tasked with finding a way of protecting it. Having spent months trying to find a way out of the dark wizard's clutches, however, he had no intention of helping him further his plan for immortality.

"So, you're going to steal it? You-Know-Who will just come after you." Remus fretted.

Regulus nodded, sitting down heavily in the middle of the floorboards. He pulled his legs round so he was sat cross-legged and fiddled with the locket, trying to open the clasp but failing. He frowned at it angrily. James was sat on one of the beds, holding Severus' hand discretely under the covers, Remus was sat on the other, and Sirius was stood awkwardly, leaning against a wall and looking down at his little brother with worry lines etched into his forehead.

"He'll expect a report on how I've protected it. He's a master of Legilimency so I can't lie." Regulus told them. He sighed, chucking the locket away from him, and he instantly looked calmer. He scratched at his poodle curls as he thought. "But I have to try..."

Remus and Sirius both made sounds of protest, but then James cleared his throat and said slowly, as if he was still forming the thought:

"The trick with fooling a Legilimens is show them what they expect to see." All eyes turned to him and he shrugged his shoulders slightly, still thinking through his train of thought. "So... you need to give him the impression that you have protected the Horcrux. You need to throw him off track, because in reality you'll just be protecting a decoy, and we'll destroy the real thing away from you, so you don't have those memories to show him..."

Regulus frowned.

"I have this memory to show him."

James winced.

"Not if we Obliviate you..."

A silence hung over the room. Sirius was glaring softly at his friend and he pushed himself off the wall, crossing his arms.

"No one here is skilled enough to alter his memory to the point where they only extract the

incriminating bits. It's too risky that we might leave him a drooling mess!" He protested.

James nodded, not breaking eye-contact.

"You're right, no one here could do it. But... Lily Evans can." He responded. "I hung out with that study group of hers earlier in the year and she's crazy good at charms. And then... I know a place... I think we can do this."

Which was how James found himself explaining his plan to a crowded carriage on the Hogwarts Express back to school. Remus was wearing the locket, looking anxious, and James had a stolen necklace from his mother's vanity secure in his pocket. Severus was chewing distractedly on his thumb-nail, staring out the foggy window. Sirius was sat next to his little brother, legs touching but neither saying anything to each other, and Lily was staring at James wide-eyed as he explained the plan and everything that lead up to it.

"So let me get this straight," She clarified, "Instead of going to school, when we get to Hogsmeade station, we're going to sneak away and take measures to protect a fake Horcrux, which you're going to transfigure, then we're going to destroy the real one, and I'm going to doctor Regulus' memory so that You-Know-Who is none the wiser?" James nodded. Lily smiled. "I'm in."

James grinned back at her, pulling out his mother's locket and his wand. He studied the Horcrux around Remus' neck and took a deep breath, before pointing his wand at his mother's jewellery and muttering a spell. It twisted and grew a little until it perfectly resembled the one hanging around Remus' neck.

"Alright, you wear this one." He said, pushing it at Regulus. The younger boy took it gently, turning it over in his hands.

"This really is amazing transfiguration." He mumbled, and James shrugged, feeling a little bashful.

"It's kind of my best subject." He muttered back. He didn't notice as Regulus opened the locket and slipped a note inside, before closing it again discretely.

He settled back into his chair, but at that moment Severus stopped chewing on his thumb and said:

"It's time."

The train was pulling into the station, and the students were getting ready to pile out and make their way up to the castle. Their carriage steeled themselves, shrugging their school robes slightly closer to them against the January chill and making their way off the train. The station was crowded with students milling about, trying to stick with their friends, and James dragged Lily off to one side, where Remus and Severus were standing, trying to look inconspicuous. A moment later they were joined by Regulus, and then Sirius.

"How are we getting there?" Asked Sirius, wringing his hands in nerves. James bit his lip.

"We're flying. Lily with Sirius, Severus with Remus. I'm going to take Regulus up front. It's very important you guys stay out of Regulus' vision." They all nodded. James turned to Lily. "Fancy summoning us some brooms?"

Lily waved her wand through the air.

"Accio." She said, eyes closed in concentration.

A few moments later three brooms came soaring towards them. James caught one out of the air, and noticed Sirius catching the other two. The eldest Black handed one over to Severus, and helped Lily climb on to the back of his. James settled on his own broom, sitting further back than he usually would, and motioned for Regulus to sit in front of him. The boy did so with a deep breath.

"I don't fly like you, don't try and take control – you're only there for directions, remember." He warned, gripping the handle and looking straight ahead. James had a moment of wondering where to put his hands, before eventually deciding to grip lightly on to the younger boy's hips.

"No one flies like I do, kid." He mumbled, smirking slightly and feeling some of his old confidence returning to him, since he was on a broom, even if he wasn't allowed to take control of it. "Now kick off and head North-West, keep low to the trees until we're a safe distance from the castle."

Regulus did exactly as told, and they flew in peace for some time, James kicking the back of Regulus' legs to encourage him to left or right, and gently steering his hips to get him to go up or down, despite the boy's warning not to take control. James didn't want to talk too much, to save Lily too much editing, and Regulus was unable to respond to James' steering touches for the same reason. Eventually, having flown for over an hour, and so high that James' fingers were turning slightly blue, James pushed on Regulus' hips to get him to start the descent, and they landed, deftly, on a small rock next to a sheer cliff face.

"Broadsands?" Regulus asked, looking up. James shook his head.

"I wish."

The others landed behind them, but Regulus kept his eyes trained on the cliff. James motioned for them to follow, and began gently pushing Regulus along the cliff wall, towards a fissure in the face. They stumbled and slipped and carefully picked their way down the treacherous path, until they came to a dead-end at the opening of the fissure, where dark, cold water was lapping at the sides of the cave.

"Ready for a swim?" James asked, and Regulus, good as ever, kept his eyes trained on the water as he jumped in.

James was not long after, and he thanked his parents' stupid traditions of jumping off cliffs in the middle of winter for preparing him for icy, salty water around him. His school robes instantly became water-logged, and weighed him down, but he pushed on despite them, shoving Regulus forward into the fissure and through a horribly claustrophobic tunnel that would fill with water easily at high-tide, until it eventually widened out into a large cave. Regulus found purchase on the rocks and rose out of the water, James and the others following behind. Water splashed off their clothes, and looking around he saw Lily and Sirius both shedding their robes and standing in their school-sopping school uniforms underneath.

Severus waved his wand, and some heat returned to their body.

"Thanks." Said Regulus, almost turning around, but James pushed his head back to the cave wall.

"Here's the entrance." He mumbled, and Regulus stepped through the darkened opening, lighting the tip of his wand as he went.

"Lumos Maximus." Regulus said, a second after disappearing from sight, and the bright light on the end of his wand grew into a large ball, which Regulus flicked into the air. As it rose it

illuminated an eerie black lake, and James stepped through the entrance after him as Regulus went to step into the water, and pulled the boy back.

"Don't." He muttered harshly, and then pressed a finger to his lips and made a shushing sound. "This place is more dangerous than you know."

James didn't want any of them to ask how he knew of this place – or why he thought it was a good place to hide a fake Horcrux, and he knew he was giving too much away already, but he was eager to avoid waking the monsters in the lake if he could. He pointed to the middle of the calm black water, where a small island was situated, and took a deep breath. Once he was sure Regulus had seen it, he pushed the boy around the edge of the lake, allowing Regulus to take in as much detail as he could of the place without seeing any of the other teenagers behind him.

James herded the fourteen year old towards a small boat. It had a coppery-green chain which he used to haul it closer to the surface, and then he ushered Regulus inside to sit directly at the front. There wasn't enough room for all of them, so he turned to the group.

"Lily, Sirius, Remus..." He started. "Stay and keep a look out from the rocks here. If you see anything moving in the lake that isn't us... then I need you to use every defensive spell you know."

"James, how dangerous is this place?" Sirius asked, frowning. James bit his lip. "How come you even know about it?"

James shook his head, glancing back at the boat and seeing Severus climb in after Regulus, it was already a tight fit, but James was the man with the plan, so he'd have to squeeze in as well.

"I'll tell you, I promise. But not now. The less time we spend here the better." He replied.

Sirius frowned, but nodded, and the three of them stayed back on the rocks as James climbed down into the boat with his two Slytherin friends. He clutched a little at the back of Severus' freezing and wet robes, and then tapped the edge of the boat with his wand, and it immediately began to move smoothly through the water. Regulus' spell was beginning to wear off, and the boy sent another ball of light shimmering into the cave ceiling. As he did so, James glanced over the side, to see the horrible monsters of the lake lying, lifeless, amongst them.

He closed his eyes and clutched tighter to Severus' back, and as he did so Severus also looked over the side and let out a loud gasp.

"Ja-"

"I know." James whispered over him, shushing him quickly. Regulus head twitched back towards them, but he didn't turn around fully, and kept his eyes trained on the pitch-black walls of their underground cave. James was grateful that Regulus had yet to peer too closely into the water.

They sailed for a little while, squished into the boat, until eventually they bumped into the island in the middle, a small area of smooth black rock, with a pedestal and stone basin standing proudly in the middle.

"What is that?" Regulus asked as he exited the boat, jumping over the last bit of water and onto dry land. James couldn't answer, it was very important Regulus do this next part without any disruptions, as this was the memory they needed Voldemort to see. He and Severus tripped from the boat, and Severus pulled a phial of emerald green, phosphorescent liquid from his robe pocket. Deftly, he handed it to Regulus, and then stood behind him.

As per plan, Regulus took the fake Horcrux from his neck and slipped it into the basin, and then he

uncorked the potion and poured it over the top.

And it should have been as simple as that. Severus had made the potion – a vile thing that Severus had hated making every second he slaved over the cauldron, but necessary – and so James had complete faith in it. And for a moment nothing happened, but then a blood-curdling scream echoed around the chamber, and James spun around to see the monsters emerging from the water.

Eyes wide with terror, he heard Regulus shout with fright, and backed up, his back hitting Regulus' with some force.

"Don't turn around! Stick to the plan!" James demanded, wand raised, at the same time Severus shouted -

"James, where the fuck are we?"

James didn't have time to answer, even if he wanted to, because an army of the dead was rapidly coming towards them. He could see, out of the corner of his eyes, that the friends they had left on the outskirts of the lake were firing spells, sparks of light and puffs of smoke that were doing very little.

Regulus was shouting hexes towards the Inferi, but they shrugged them off as if they were nothing, and kept advancing. One was so close that Severus forwent his wand and kicked dirt at it, which did nothing to stop the assault.

Instinctively, James waved his wand above his head and before he could even shout an incantation flames had erupted from it. They filled the lake instantly, sending the Inferi shrieking back into the water, and the flames seemed to take on a life of their own, twisting and swirling into a great dragon-like creature, and flying around the cave, rounding up the monstrous zombies and sending them, confused and terrified, back into the depths of the lake. James watched the flames, wide-eyed and mouth hanging slightly open, for the time it took the fire-dragon to banish the Inferi, and then, fumbling, he dropped his wand.

It could have been a disaster, but luckily, the second his wand slipped from his grip the dragon dissipated into the night. James was left staring at the charred rock where it had been, before Severus scooped up his wand and shoved it into his hands, beckoning him back to the boat which was somehow unscathed.

The three of them bounded into the boat and Severus shot a stream of air from his wand, out the back, to propel it back to shore. As they arrived on the rocks the Inferi were beginning to rise from the water again, and James rushed forwards towards Sirius, Lily and Remus and began pushing them back out the exit.

"Go – Go!" He yelled, and as they were all through, he turned back to the entrance and stamped his foot on the ground. Immediately a wall of solid black rock rose up from the ground where he had stamped and sealed the lake inside the cave, leaving them in an antechamber. James bit his thumb roughly and sharply, hissing as he drew blood, and used that same blood to mark the new stone, writing the ruin for 'payment' on the black surface in red.

"Crude." Severus remarked behind him, sounding a little hollow. James huffed.

"Yeah, well, zombies don't bleed." He shot back as explanation. Anyone that wanted to get in or out of that cave would now need to make a blood sacrifice, and Inferi were incapable of that. They were trapped in there, unless someone decided to let them out, and that suited James just fine.

He turned back to his friends just in time to see Regulus keel over, and he rushed forwards to catch the boy, but was beat to it by Remus.

"Shit, I think one of those things got him." The werewolf panicked. "He's got a long cut up his arm, and it's already going yellow."

James drew in a deep breath. A wound from Inferi could kill in less than 30 minutes.

"What do we do?" Sirius asked, dropped to his knees next to his brothers now unconscious form. "What even were those things?"

James clenched his fists at his sides.

"They're Inferi." He confessed, he turned to Remus, because the boy was hoping to be a healer and was probably Regulus' best hope of surviving this. "They're cursed by You-Know-Who himself. The wounds they inflict are susceptible to the same things they are... fire."

Remus was looking at him as if he had grown another head, but then he swallowed thickly and nodded.

"We'll need to draw the sepsis out, before cauterizing." He mumbled. James nodded, but Sirius coughed in protest.

"Did you just say 'cauterizing'?" He all but squeaked. Remus looked like he might be sick, but blew out a short breath and nodded. Sirius looked like he was going to protest more, but Lily put a hand on his shoulder and smiled at him kindly.

"Remus only has his best interest at heart, love, you know that." She reassured him.

Sirius still looked sceptical, but he put his hands up in acceptance and stood up, pacing slightly a little way away from where Remus was hovering over his brother. The werewolf shot a glance at Severus.

"You keep a basics ingredients kit on you?" He asked, and smiled slightly when Severus nodded.

The Slytherin pulled out a rather damp leather wallet about the size of a small make-up bag, and opened it up, to show various plants and tiny phials of wet ingredients. Remus surveyed them and picked out a small phial of brown coloured paste, and some large laurel leaves. He spread the paste on Regulus' wound, and then placed the leaves gently on top, pressing them down slightly. Then, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at the younger boys arm.

"Exantlo Venenum."

In seconds the leaves and paste had turned a horrible yellow colour, and Remus wiped them from Regulus' arm to see the now healthy, but still bleeding, flesh underneath.

"The poisons gone." Severus stated, but James just hummed unhappily.

"It will keep bleeding until you close the wound. It has to be done with fire." He explained. Remus shot him a look, steeling his nerves, and puffed out a couple of steady breaths.

"Okay." He mumbled, pointing his wand once more at the wound. "I'm sorry, Reg... Incendio!"

Regulus had been asleep, but on having his flesh burnt he woke up, and he cried out, terrified, confused and in pain. Severus held him down, where Remus was still searing the flesh to close the

wound, and the young boy sobbed and yelled incoherently. James glanced up to see Sirius, white as a sheet, being physically restrained by Lily.

And then it was over, as quickly as it had begun, the wound was closed, but smouldering, and clearly hurting like hell. Remus slumped over, apologising, and Severus let go of Regulus long enough for the boy to scramble away and make off to Sirius, who gathered his brother up in his arms the second he could. Regulus cried, like the child he was, and when James looked back to Remus, he saw Remus was crying too.

He held a hand to his mouth, suddenly feeling sick.

"I'm sorry." He said, feeling responsible. It had been his plan, after all, to take them to this place. There was a small lull in which nobody spoke, and the only sound was Regulus' sniffing and crying. Then Severus sighed, running a hand through his hair and shaking his head in slight exasperation.

"We're going to head back to school... Lily is going to doctor Regulus' memories as best she can, to give him the best shot at showing The Dark Lord what he wants to see, and then, James, you're going to fucking explain yourself."

James' Summer

They managed, with the help of the remaining Marauder's knowledge of various passageways and tunnels in and out of the castle, to get back in to Hogwarts undetected and unscathed. They emerged around the back of a tapestry on the second floor, and noticed immediately the tired footfalls of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws making their way up to their dorms after a long sorting and feast. They shared a glance amongst themselves, and then Lily and Remus ducked out to pretend to be ushering children along, as prefects. A moment later Sirius followed them, and then a few minutes after that, Regulus ducked out as well and said quick goodbyes before heading down to the dungeons, which left James and Severus nestled behind the heavy curtain.

James gulped down his worries, shooting the Slytherin a concerned look, who was looking back at him with a furrowed brow.

"So..." The Slytherin said, leaving it hanging. James shuffled slightly in anxiousness. He played with the hem of his shirt and watched his fingers twisting and twirling the material so that he didn't have to look at Severus.

"This summer was difficult." He finally stated. "You were busy a lot of the time, and could barely make it down to see me to get me the Elixir – which I totally get – but it left me with a lot of time alone. Mum and dad treated me like I was made of glass, and I was fed up it. I mean, it wasn't that long ago that I was a star athlete, and now it's like everyone only sees me as this pathetic kid who needs saving and looking after. And after Pete..." He trailed off, angry, clenching his fist at his sides, and then took a steadying breath and continued. "Over the summer there was an attack on a half-blood kid who lives near us. She's only nine, and she got hurt really bad, she's still sick in bed now. Word got out it was Death Eaters, and I got... I got so mad, knowing that Pete could have had a hand in it. The next thing I knew my wardrobe had caught fire. I freaked out and between mum and dad they were able to put it out. They put it down to accidental magic because I was upset, but I knew better."

Severus huffed out a vaguely impressed breath.

"The same kind of fire as in the cave?" He asked. After a moment, James nodded.

"Fiendfyre." He confessed. "I didn't know I even had it in me to do something like that, but there was no mistaking it. The flames had a will of their own, and for a long time I couldn't control them. But... I wanted to."

Severus hissed gently.

"That's incredibly dark magic James." He admonished. James closed his eyes.

"I know. That's why I went around asking for places to safely practise and not be detected by the Ministry, and somewhere where I wouldn't hurt anybody." He explained. "Godric's Hollow has all these old wizarding families, and not all of them are nice. I ended up speaking with a guy named Carrow, who told me about the cave. He, uh, he took me there. I stupidly went along with him."

Severus grimaced.

"Carrow, you say?" He asked. James nodded.

"Turns out he's a Death Eater, probably one of the ones who hurt that little girl... I didn't know. I just thought, you know, here's an adult who's willing to help me gain back some semblance of

dignity." He carried on. "So we got to the cave, and he asked me to show him what it was I wanted to practise. He taught me how to control the flames, a little bit. They're still way too powerful, I never let them get any bigger than like... this." He added, holding out his hands to roughly the size of a Quaffle. Severus looked down at the empty space between his palms, and then coughed into his fist.

"So you got a Death Eater to teach you dark magic in what was clearly a dangerous place." He concluded. "Anything else?"

James huffed.

"It wasn't like that. I told you, I didn't know what he was. I didn't know what the place was, really. I had my suspicions it was connected to You-Know-Who, but I took Carrow at face value. He taught me some spells, as it turns out they're also pretty dark magic. The curse I used on the ring, I practised that... and that blood-sealing spell from the cave. Then the bastard used the Imperius curse on me." He confessed. "I figured at that point he wasn't as nice a guy as I'd thought. He... he got me to walk into the water. I didn't know why but... under that curse, it just made sense that I do it, so I walked into the water. And then I found out about the Inferi."

Severus made a strangled noise in his throat that he tried to hide with another cough but James had heard loud and clear. The Gryffindor wrapped his arms around himself.

"What happened next?" Severus asked, when James wasn't forthcoming with anything else. The Quidditch Captain gulped noisily.

"The Inferi, they grabbed at my ankles, started dragging me down. Under the weight of Imperius I... just went with them. I thought for a moment that I was going to drown, and I think that immediate danger must of broken the Imperius on me, because I was back in my own mind. I have no idea how, but I managed to get to the island in the middle, and I climbed up the stone to the basin." He broke off, taking a ragged breath, eyes not looking at Severus, but past him, as if reliving those moments in the cave. "There was a note on the bottom of the basin, carved in the stone. You wouldn't see it looking down, but I was crawling out from the water, still being pursued by those monsters. It said... It said 'By order of Lord Voldemort - you will die here or you will kill here'."

They were completely silent for a long moment, and then Severus shook his head.

"Did you... kill Carrow?"

James shot him an angry look.

"Of course not. I... I was overwhelmed by the Inferi on the island. I accepted that I would die." He told the boy. "I'm actually pretty used to thinking I was going to die, but this... felt different. I knew I wasn't going to get a chance to say goodbye to anyone, and that my parents wouldn't know where I was. I thought... I thought if I died there I would spend the rest of eternity as part of You-Know-Who's army of the dead. And that made me so angry, to think in death I might hurt someone, because I would be controlled by evil. Next thing I knew, all those zombies that were pressing down on me were backing away, screaming, rushing back to the water and I was... I was on fire. But the flames weren't hurting me, they just engulfed me, like they were protecting me. I looked back over to Carrow, but he was long gone. It was just me, in the middle of the lake of the dead, surrounded by fiendfyre. The flames protected me all the way back out of the lake, back to the surface, and then I was just swimming in the freezing cold sea, as if none of it had ever happened."

Severus reached out and touched his hand gently, and James breathed out a happy breath of relief at the contact.

"Why didn't you tell anyone?" He asked. James shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"I had gone into that cave with the express purpose of practising dark magic. Dark magic that seems to have some otherworldly reason to keep me protected. I didn't know what was happening to me, and I wasn't ready to even attempt explaining it... even to you." He admitted. "But then with everything with Regulus and the locket, it seemed like the kind of place, protected as it was by all those horrid things, that even Death Eaters would struggle to get to, which would buy us time if everything went tits up."

Severus pulled him to his side and rested his chin on James' shoulder, breathing slowly and carding a hand through the Gryffindor's hair. James nestled in to the embrace. The Slytherin squeezed him tighter, and then pressed a small kiss to his ear.

"You're such a stupid Gryffindor." He mumbled. "You don't need to prove yourself so much. Not that I think you are, but even if you were in need of protection, that's not always such a terrible thing. You can depend on me."

James sucked in a slightly panicked breath, and then nodded against his boyfriend's chest, where his head was nestled. He clutched gently to Severus' robes, which were still slightly damp from their dip. He thought about the fiendfyre, and how it was hell-bent on keeping him safe, how back in the cave the massive dragon of flames had come to his aid. He wondered if he could control it, just a little, and then he felt steam rising and noticed he was automatically warming the robes in his hands. Seconds later they were dry.

"James..." Severus breathed, looking down at his now dry robes. "That was... wandless, incantationless, incredibly powerful magic, and you just did it like it was nothing."

James bit his lip, shaking his head a little in confusion.

"I didn't... It's the fiendfyre. I can control it a little. I don't know why." He mumbled. Severus sent him a searching look.

"I'm about three-hundred percent certain it has something to do with Flamouriades, but you're probably the longest case of someone living with the disease, there's still so much that isn't known." He replied. Then he blinked rapidly as the heavy tapestry was pulled back, sending them from relative darkness into the bright lights of the corridor outside.

He and James turned to see Professor Slughorn levelling them with a confused, but wary look.

"Now boys, it's after curfew. You should have been back in your houses. Why are you hiding behind this tapestry?" He asked. As he did, Professor McGonagall came up behind him, looking livid.

"Potter! I've been looking everywhere for you!" She seethed. James shared a glance with Severus.

"We were... we were just – um -" He stuttered, and then Severus rose an eyebrow and said:

"Snogging."

James immediately choked on his own saliva, sending his boyfriend an incredulous look and wheezing out a sharp - "Severus!"

McGonagall and Slughorn both looked rather taken aback, and Slughorn dropped the curtain in his shock, causing James to catch it. The two boys gingerly made their way around the tapestry and into the corridor, looking suitably chastised. McGonagall patted down her dress and surveyed them as if she expected them of lying. Which they were. Her lips thinned dramatically, and then she sighed.

"Well I suppose I'm glad to see you put the house rivalry to rest." She said, then rolled her eyes. "The two of you are still expected in your respective dormitories – and I don't expect you to be missing any more feasts." She added, waiting long enough to hear the chorus of 'yes ma'am' before swirling in her robes and leading James back up to Gryffindor. James waved behind him as he went, glancing back to see Severus being lead down to the dungeons, and decided that now was a time for sleep, and they could figure out what they were going to do with the actual Horcrux the next day.

The next day was a lot of the gang trying unsuccessfully to co-ordinate with each other in the corridors between classes. Lily had cornered James on his way to Care of Magical Creatures, to discuss when they were going to destroy the locket. James had then tried to pass the message on to Remus and Sirius, catching them coming out of Ancient Runes, as James himself tried not to be late for his Defence class. They were unsuccessful in setting a time or place, due to James needing to hurry off, and some gossiping Ravenclaws hanging around. Later that day Severus had a Potions class with Remus, where the two of them discussed when and where they should be meeting as a group, and came up with after dinner, by the Herbology Greenhouses. Remus carried the message to Sirius as they passed in the corridor, Remus heading to Alchemy, whilst Sirius was heading out on a free period to meet James on the pitch and get some Quidditch practise in. Sirius gave the message to James whilst twenty feet in the air and batting bludgers away, and James then carried it to Lily, as they had their charms class together. Separately, Severus managed to update Regulus just as they were heading into the Great Hall for dinner.

There was a definite tense atmosphere over dinner, which did not go unnoticed by Remus, who kept glancing between his friends, and the Slytherin table, where Severus and Regulus were eating their own meals in silence. Remus allowed his eyes to stay on Regulus for a moment. The boy was small, smaller than he had any right to be at fourteen, and pale. Remus had always put it down to him being aristocratic – the type of paleness that came from never having to work outside (or at all). He wondered now whether the slightness, the paleness, and the always a little bit worried look was due to Regulus' Death Eater activities.

There hadn't been much chance, between Regulus telling them about his divination powers, to them taking measures against Voldemort, for any real discussion on why Regulus was a Death Eater in the first place. Remus knew he had no leg to stand on when it came to keeping secrets, but he felt vindicated – Death Eaters were blood purists – they hurt people. Remus had thought Regulus was... better than that.

He reminded himself that Regulus was better than that; that the boy had found a way to help bring down the evil wizard from within his own ranks, and was acting on it, at great risk to his own life. But...

A year. The night before, talking in quiet voices in their dormitory, Sirius had confessed he had known Regulus was a Death Eater for 'about a year'. He had suggested he didn't think Regulus had been in Voldemort's ranks for long before confessing to his brother. But that still left an entire year of being a Death Eater, where anything could have happened, and Regulus could have done any number of terrible things. Did this latest adventure in destroying a Horcrux make up for it? Remus wasn't sure.

They'd left their relationship undefined as well. Regulus had confessed to his divining that Remus was a werewolf, and had suggested, somewhat, that he might be okay with the absolute mess sleeping with Sirius had brought on, but they'd never confirmed anything. They had never confirmed whether all was forgiven, whether they were an official couple, or whether Remus was even allowed to try and make them one again. The werewolf knew, logically, there were far more important things to be worrying about than whether Regulus would be amicable to dating him again, but he couldn't help it was at the forefront of his mind.

Despite it all, he wanted to be dating Regulus again. He had pined for the boy for about a year, and it occurred to Remus that that entire time Regulus had been a Death Eater, and it had never changed how he had felt about him.

He wondered whether it was okay to think like that.

He glanced across to Lily Evans, who was picking at her Shepherd's Pie half-heartedly. He liked Lily, they were good friends, and had similar interests. He'd already done so much that could hurt her, by sleeping with her boyfriend, and he wondered whether it would be too much to then try making a relationship work with Regulus, when the boy was directly involved in a gang who opposed everything Lily was. How could he call himself her friend if he was even considering it.

Then he wondered which of them he would rather lose – Regulus or Lily – and felt a little bit sick.

He hated that his personal life had become so complicated.

"It's almost time." James spoke, voice sounding soft and faint, poking his fork around his plate. Remus noticed he hadn't actually taken a single bite since sitting down, and frowned.

"Eat, James. Just a little." He commanded, and then shook himself as it came out lower and more demanding than he had meant. He watched as James obediently shovelled a forkful into his mouth, and then cringed, knowing he'd accidentally hit on his Alpha-tone in his worry. "I mean, you don't have to." He amended.

James immediately stopped eating, going a little paler.

"Do you think we'll be able to do this?" Sirius then asked, and Remus glanced across the table to see his food was also untouched.

Remus had grown accustomed to thinking of Sirius as his mate, but never once had he thought of the boy as needing much in the way of reassurance. Now, he watched as Lily placed a hand over Sirius' and smiled gently and kindly.

"I think so." She said. "We have to try, anyway."

He marvelled, that only a week or so ago, he would have burnt with jealousy at her touching what was his – and now he squirmed in guilt because of the things he knew Sirius had yet to tell her, about what had happened between them. He was never going to tell her himself – he wasn't sure it was his place. He didn't want to ruin their relationship, and he felt it was on Sirius to fess up, if the Beater felt there was a need to, but he couldn't rid the guilt of what they had done, and Lily not knowing.

He glanced over to the Slytherin table once more, where Regulus was clearing away his plate and standing to exit, Severus a moment after him, and winced.

"Lets go." He mumbled, and a few seconds later they were all making their way out of the Great Hall. Remus felt as if all eyes were on him, although he knew there was no reason they should be.

Nobody knew what they planned to do that evening.

He lead the group out of the entrance hall and into the biting January air, following the figures of Regulus and Severus a few meters ahead, as they picked their way across the grounds towards the greenhouses. A few minutes later, they had all gathered in a secluded spot, and Sirius, who had been in charge of the locket since that morning, pulled it from around his neck and placed it on the ground.

For a moment they all stared at it, silent and foreboding.

"Any ideas?" Sirius asked. He looked better immediately, for taking the locket off, and Remus wondered what dark magic was cast on it.

"One." James replied, sighing, with his hands on his hips as he glared down at the necklace.

"No." Severus said in response. "It's far too dangerous."

James hadn't described his idea, and Remus allowed himself a small smile that the two of them were so in sync now. It was mad to think that once those two boys had hated each other, and now they were probably the most stable couple Remus knew.

James threw up his hands a little in exasperation, but declined any further arguing.

"It's going to be pretty damn well hard to destroy. It's literally a piece of His soul – He wouldn't have given it out lightly." Regulus informed them, rubbing at the back of his neck. Despite it all, Remus thought the habit to be cute.

Lily drew her wand.

"Exumai!" She tried, but it only flopped the locket lazily on to its back. She raised her wand and tried again, "Bombarda!"

The locket flopped again, but certainly didn't explode. Lily bit her lip in concentration, but James just shook his head.

"We're going to need to think darker than that." He said, but Severus grunted in an annoyed way.

"I said no."

James huffed, raising his wand and swirling it through the air as he thought.

"Deletrius." He attempted, but the locket didn't even move. "Confringo!" He tried instead, pointing it at the locket. The necklace flew into the air with some force, landing back down, smoking a little, but otherwise seemed unharmed. James frowned. Annoyed, he pointed his wand once more and said, loudly: "Incendio!"

The locket burst into flames, for a moment, and then the flames put out, and the locket was left quite unharmed. James huffed loudly.

Remus added his two sickles in, trying 'Reducto ' (to no effect), and then Sirius and Regulus showed off that they truly were brothers by pointing their wands at the locket at the same time and saying in unison;

"Perderus!"

The locket flipped from the force of the double spell, but remained annoyingly free of harm.

Severus stepped forward, waving his wand through the air as if he was cutting it, and said, firmly and with power:

"Sectumsemptra."

Nothing happened for a moment, and then the locket began to glow red hot and shake violently. For a brief second Remus thought they had done it, but then it calmed again and appeared as if nothing had happened.

"What was that?" The werewolf asked. "It almost had it."

Severus frowned, his brow pulling together harshly, and turned to him with a worried expression.

"A spell of my own invention." He admitted. "I hadn't thought it would work but..." He glanced at James. "I was attempting to think 'darker'."

James huffed noisily again.

"I could -" He began slowly, as if he expected to be rebuffed again, but Severus interrupted him.

"You should."

James opened his mouth to protest, and then closed it again, eyes wide, obviously not expecting for his significant other to give in so easily. To cover his shock he cleared his throat, crossing his arms, and nodded.

"R-Right." He said, then looked around at the group. "Um... you should probably stand back." He instructed.

Remus could see Sirius go to protest, but he was shot down immediately by Severus, who began dragging them all back a few feet away. He turned back to James at the last minute and held out his hands about a Quaffle's length apart.

"No bigger than this." He warned. James nodded, turning back to the locket, with his back to them.

He took a moment to take in a deep steadying breath, and then raised his wand above his head. Remus waited, but nothing happened. James said no incantation and no spell was used. A moment later, James stamped his foot in anger and shouted:

"Fucking *do something*!"

As soon as he had said the words flames erupted from the end of his wand; large and white-hot. They flew with a ferocity that had James stumbling backwards, and swirled around him, twisting and flicking and taking form as they watched, until a fiery dragon – no bigger than a Quaffle, was sitting on James' shoulder like a familiar. Remus gasped, because those flames were *touching* James, flicking up into his hair, and fiery claws digging into his back – but James seemed entirely unaffected by the heat.

"Destroy it." James ordered, and the fire-dragon took flight, only to dive down towards the locket and engulf the necklace in fire.

They watched, some feet off, as the dragon circled the locket, completely inflaming it, but nothing happened. James began to sweat with concentration, and he stepped back slightly as he mouthed around the word 'more'. The dragon grew slightly, flames flicking between white and blue.

"James!" Severus warned, but James was too busy focusing on the fire-familiar, as it continued to grow in size. It expanded until it was roughly the size of a Labrador, then a Great Dane, then a horse. Severus made a sound of protest, but the flames continued to grow, and James came stumbling back.

"More." They heard him say, just as he reached them and began pushing them backwards. His hands on their skin, as he pushed them away, were searing hot, and Remus was able to get a good look at his friends eyes, to see his pupils were flickering with red, like flames.

"James!" He shouted, trying to get the boys attention, but James just pushed them further away as he breathed out another 'more' and the dragon grew even further, turning violet in colour as it became hotter and hotter, and reached the size of small van.

Then, suddenly, it burst. They all ducked down, yelling and screaming, as fire-balls came careening towards them from the dragon, except James, who stood stock still and allowed the flames to engulf him. Severus yelled. Lily swore loudly and high-pitched. The flames encircled James once, and then, finally, died down and put out.

James was left, smoking a little, but entirely unharmed.

"Sssshit." Remus breathed.

Before he could even process what was happening, James had rushed forwards to the site they had left the locket, and then turned back to them and breathed out a laugh.

"Ashes." He said. "We did it."

And then the greenhouse windows shattered outwards, due to the raging fire within.

Memory Charms a Werewolf

Severus yelled incoherently as the glass of the greenhouses burst outwards, flying like deadly shrapnel out towards them. He, Regulus, Lily, Black and Lupin had all been too far away to be hurt by the jagged edges of the white hot glass, but James had been closer – and had taken the full brunt. One second the happy-go-lucky Gryffindor was grinning at them, laughing breathlessly that somehow, miraculously, they had managed to destroy the Horcrux – the second he had been flown bodily from his position and was smashed into the floor by the force of the explosion. Glass was scattered all around him, and Severus could see the bright red gashes the pieces had left on James, lying now unconscious, face down on the floor.

He ran forwards instinctively, but was held back by a panicked hand on his forearm.

"Hold up!" Said a voice. Severus didn't look behind him to see who was hindering him, but his mind supplied that the voice had belonged to Black. He tugged a little at the hold on his arm, but the Gryffindor Beater held strong and said; "It's too dangerous – those flames are -"

"Fiendfyre, I know!" Severus snapped. "That's why we have to get James away!"

Lily and Regulus were trying different water spells on the fire, but the water was simply evaporating before it could even get close to the source. Lupin was running off towards the castle. Severus didn't know for certain, but he expected it was to find adult help, and not due to underlying cowardice. He tugged once more on his arm, and this time Sirius relented, allowing him to rush forwards towards James.

The flames were already rushing out of the greenhouse, spreading to the area around it, getting increasingly closer to James' unconscious form, and Severus kicked glass away with his foot as he tried to fight the insane heat and get to his boyfriend. James looked broken and pathetic, lying in the dirt, eyes closed and covered in cuts and bruises from the explosion. Severus wasn't sure if the Fiendfyre would protect him, as it had done in the past, in his unconscious state, and he really didn't want to risk finding out.

"James..." He mumbled as he got to the boy, running a hand over his back and then hooking it under his shoulder and heaving him up. James showed no signs of waking, but Severus could feel breath on his hand when he checked, and so wasn't massively worried. "Okay, up we go." He muttered, hoisting the boy into the air and rearranging him so he fit nicely in his arms. He shot another look at the flames, which were beginning to edge after them, and carried James back to relative safety, where Lily and the Black brothers were waiting.

A moment later Remus came hurrying back out of the castle, followed by the four heads of houses, and Dumbledore himself. They came crashing towards them, and the second they were in earshot Severus could hear McGonagall gasping.

"How did this happen?" She asked, disbelief and amazement colouring her tone. Severus gently lowered himself to his knees, still cradling James unconscious body to him, but relieving some of the weight, as he replied.

"James." He muttered. "Spell got out of control."

Dumbledore was eyeing him cautiously. Severus had never truly trusted Dumbledore; the man always gave the distinct impression that no matter what was going on he was three steps ahead of the game, and it unnerved Severus. Not to mention there was nothing to like about a man who so

clearly took pleasure in other peoples misfortunes. Dumbledore swung the word 'interesting' around as if it meant 'delightful', and Severus couldn't get on board with it. Now, he glared right back; daring the man to question further what had happened.

Before he did anything, however, Dumbledore turned to the flames and waved his hand through the air. A short look of concentration fluttered across his face, and then the fire was receding, until it was a tiny ball the size of a Snitch, and snuffed out. Professor Sprout gave a small strangled sound at the remains of her greenhouse, and Severus could hear the distant, tinny sounds of a weed-ling mandrake crying out; not enough to knock anyone out, but certainly unpleasant to the ears.

"See to the plants." Dumbledore instructed, and instantly Sprout and Flitwick were picking their way into the smouldering remains to see what was salvageable and if anything was in need of immediate rescue. "Fetch Poppy, if you will." Dumbledore added, and Slughorn cleared his throat, putting his hand in the air.

"I'll do that." He said, and with that the head of Slytherin had turned on his heel and was trotting back up to the castle before anyone could suggest otherwise.

"Now," The Headmaster said, once Slughorn was well and truly away and it was just the teenagers, him and McGonagall left. "You mean to tell me that James Potter is responsible for the Fiendfyre, and the destruction of Greenhouse three?"

Severus allowed himself the privilege of narrowing his eyes in defiance.

"Not deliberately." He responded. Dumbledore quirked a small smirk at his tone.

"Fiendfyre is incredibly powerful, incredibly *dangerous* magic. Even to conjure that kind of flame is beyond the reach of most NEWTS students, I would never expect a child studying at Hogwarts to have any control over it." He explained. "So can you tell me, mister Snape, why mister Potter would be attempting a spell considered dangerous, and in most circles, *dark* magic?"

Severus didn't have an answer prepared. To confess why would be to confess to the entire story of how they had come across the Horcrux and their plan to destroy it – which felt more outrageous and stupid the more he thought back on it. To confess all that would be to confess Regulus' involvement with the Death Eaters, and would be to confess James' obvious talent for dark spells; none of which he wanted Dumbledore to know.

He was, luckily, saved the trouble of replying, because at that moment Madame Pomfrey arrived, rushing over to them and fussing the moment she saw James.

"What in Merlin's name happened?" She screeched, and then didn't wait for an answer as she practically ripped James from Severus' arms and began checking him over with detection spells. "He's hot." She mumbled as she did so. Severus knew full well, his skin was like plastic on a hot day, that had warmed up being left out in the sun; not unbearable, but certainly too hot to be normal skin temperature.

"That's a constant state of being for him." He lied. It wasn't entirely untrue, having Cinis did mean that James' body temperature was above average at the best of times, but Severus knew he was currently hotter than he had any real right to be.

Pomfrey levitated James' body so it was suspended in the air, arms and legs hanging uselessly as if he had been picked up by a board under his back, and began drifting him back towards the castle. Severus instantly began to follow, but was rebuffed by the medi-witch.

"He will have visitors when I am sure he's fit enough." She told him, to which Severus snarled.

"I'm his boyf – I mean, chief carer!" He responded hotly. "I'm the only one with full access to his notes and medical history, and as such it's paramount I go with him!" He added, defending his case. He knew full well he had almost shouted his personal relationship to James, rather than his professional one, and felt slightly foolish. He blamed it on the adrenaline.

Pomfrey looked at him in shock for a moment, and then glanced back towards Dumbledore. The Headmaster gave a small, discrete nod, and then she relented and waved for Severus to come along. He did so, with one final look back at the rest of the group. They were being ushered away from the greenhouse by McGonagall, and he could see them all shaking their heads and denying all knowledge as to why James might have been messing around with Fiendfyre.

Remus watched Severus take off after James and Pomfrey, which left the rest of their group with Dumbledore and McGonagall. McGonagall had questioned them for some time regarding what had happened and why they had been playing with Fiendfyre, but they all kept their lips firmly sealed, only repeating that it had been an accident and that they weren't sure how it had come about. Eventually Dumbledore had put a hand on McGonagall's shoulder and said:

"I don't believe this is going to be helpful to any of us, my dear. Let's go back to the castle and we can look into this more when mister Potter awakens."

McGonagall had reluctantly agreed, and headed back to the castle with the Headmaster. Which left Remus, Regulus, Sirius and Lily alone.

"I should... um-" Lily said, turning to Regulus and waving her wand through the air. Regulus nodded.

"Right. Yes." He responded, and the way he said 'yes' was so incredibly posh, and adorable, that Remus closed his eyes in his confusion over their relationship and sighed.

Sirius coughed.

"Not that I'm doubting you," He said, treading cautiously and staring at Lily. "But, you *can* do this, right?"

Remus worried about that too. James seemed to have faith in her Charms ability, but really they only had his word for it. Memory charms were notoriously unpredictable, and if Lily did mess it up then Regulus could lose massive chunks of his memory – or not remember anything at all. Sirius had called it leaving him a 'drooling mess'. As it was, Lily nodded to the question, seeming resolved and determined.

"I'm the best in the year." She said with a wink.

It went little way to calming Remus' nerves. She turned to Regulus and stood in front of him, twirling her wand towards his face. She made sure he was ready, and then, just as she was going to cast the spell, Remus interrupted loudly.

"Lily, wait!"

His voice came out deep and demanding in the way he was beginning to associate with his Alpha-

tone, and he'd never been so glad to hit on it in his life. Lily instantly paused in what she was doing, wand half way through the air, and lips pursed as she was about to say the incantation. Sirius and Regulus turned to him expectantly.

"Please don't use your weird alpha powers on my girlfriend." Sirius admonished.

Remus wanted to protest, but he had made the mistake of looking at Regulus, who was biting on his lower lip slightly and staring at Remus with slightly glazed over eyes. Remus took a hesitant sniff of the air, and was almost overpowered by Regulus' scent, which had spiked with desire. He swallowed thickly.

"Um... can I borrow you, for a second?" He asked, and with a final look between Sirius and Lily, who seemed to be snapping out of her Alpha-tone induced trance, Regulus nodded and followed Remus a few meters away – out of earshot for anyone without werewolf senses.

"Was that a werewolf thing?" Regulus asked, in an undertone, the second they came to a stop. His voice came out strained in a way that let on to how he might be a little turned on. Remus tried really hard not to think about it. He tried to remind himself that Regulus was barely even fourteen, that thinking about him in that way was messed up. Then his mind supplied that he'd lost his virginity at fourteen – and that Regulus was thinking it, clearly.

"Yeah." He confessed, not trusting himself with anything more than one-word answers. Regulus breathed out a small, quick breath, that sounded equal parts amused, and amazed.

"How does that work? You can just command anyone to do what you want?" He questioned.

Remus tried really hard not to notice how the Slytherin's pupils were blown out, or how his lips were going red from how much he was chewing on it.

"It's, urm... a power thing. If both parties consciously or subconsciously view me as more powerful than them, and I'm a trustworthy leader... it's complicated. Pack mentality kind of thing." He tried to explain, taking in breaths through his mouth because Regulus' scent was all of a sudden throwing him off.

Regulus looked up at him through his lashes, his ridiculously long lashes. His cheeks flushed a little with colour, and Remus closed his eyes so as not to reach out and take advantage.

"So..." Regulus began. "You could... use it on me."

Remus physically took a step back, pinching at the bridge of his nose like he had a headache, and shook his head. He wanted to tell Regulus yes, that in fact he had used it on the boy before, but he was entirely overwhelmed by the attraction and arousal shedding off the younger Black sibling, and knew he needed to remove himself from the situation before his instincts took over and he pressured the boy into something more physical.

"Reg..." He mumbled, trying to get them away from this topic and back on track. "Think about this before you agree to it. Lily's good, but it might not go the way you planned."

Regulus suddenly adopted a serious expression, and Remus breathed a sigh of relief that at least some of the younger boy's arousal abated.

"It's the best plan we have..." He replied, and then stepped forward and took Remus' hand. Remus was reminded of Regulus, sat upstairs in the Potter's cottage, explaining his psychic abilities and how they worked, and wondered what feelings and impressions the younger boy was gleaming from him now. After a moment Regulus sighed and said, "If it goes wrong... if somehow I end up

not remembering any of this... then you should know that I -"

"Guys, hurry up – I'd like to get this done before curfew!"

Remus could have cursed Sirius in that moment. Regulus let go of his hand and turned back to where Lily was still patiently waiting. In desperation Remus leant forwards and grabbed his arm, spinning him back round.

"Not yet," He commanded, and then, not thinking too much, he leant down and claimed Regulus' ridiculously red, chewed on lips in a kiss.

He'd been thinking too much about all the things he didn't like about what Regulus had done, but now he reminded himself that he still loved who Regulus was. He all but melted as the younger boy began to respond, leaning up slightly and running his hands up Remus' sides. Remus wrapped his arms properly around the boy and grinned into the kiss, not letting him go, and then deepening their lip-locking so that Regulus let out a small moan and seemed to mould their bodies even closer together.

Remus sighed a little dreamily into the kiss, and then relented to break it as he heard Sirius making gagging noises a few meters away. Instead, he leant his forehead against Regulus' and just breathed him in.

"I am so sorry for the mess I caused." He whispered, and Regulus nodded.

"I've missed you so much." He said back, then, more seriously; "Now lets go finish this thing."

He turned back to Lily and Sirius, who were trying to act like they hadn't just watched the entire display, and marched up to them. Remus allowed himself a small smile as Regulus stood in front of Lily with a determined look on his face, and finally they allowed her to perform the spell. It took some time, with Lily seeming to sift through memories they couldn't see, take bits out and stitch the back together seamlessly. She worked meticulously and with great determination, and over fifteen minutes later she finally lowered her wand, looking a little wobbly from the amount of effort it had caused.

Sirius was by her side instantly, a protective hand on her back.

"I think I did it." She told him, voice weak.

Remus took in a deep breath, turning to Regulus.

"So... how do you feel?" He asked, with no small amount of trepidation. Regulus gave him a confused look.

"How should I feel? ... Who am I?" He asked. Remus had about three seconds of heart stopping horror, face falling, before the younger boy burst into a cheeky grin and began laughing. "Chill, Lupin. I'm kidding. I think she doctored those memories perfectly. I remember just enough to know why I'm here, but when The Dark Lord tries to look inside my mind all he'll see is what we want him to see."

Remus huffed out a laugh of relief, falling forwards into his younger boyfriend and scooping him up in a hug. Regulus nuzzled in slightly, and Remus was just about to resume their earlier kissing when, predictably, he was smacked round the head by Sirius.

"Quit the PDA already, there's only so much seeing my brother get snogged I can take." He complained.

Remus planned on accepting that, being gracious and perhaps suggesting they head back to the castle, but Regulus just flipped his brother his middle finger and turned Remus head, by his chin, back to look at him, before kissing him enthusiastically.

Remus couldn't say he minded.

Chapter 32

James woke up a few hours later. He blinked his eyes open to the brilliant white of the hospital wing, screwed them up in concentration, and then groaned loudly. This alerted Severus, Pomfrey and Dumbledore, who had all been in the hospital wing, to his being awake, and almost instantly he was bombarded with questions.

"Are you okay?" Asked Severus, at the same time Pomfrey said;

"Ah, you're awake, how are you feeling?"

And Dumbledore, in a rare moment of miscalculated worry, asked.

"How did you conjure Fiendfyre?"

Severus glared across his boyfriend's bed, towards the Headmaster, but Dumbledore seemed wholly unconcerned with the protectiveness of a teenager. James groped around beside him for his glasses, which were handed to him by Severus, and slipped them on to his face, grimacing.

"What happened?" He asked, voice rough from sleep. Severus pushed out his hand along the white covers and took James' hand in his, brushing his thumb over the now healed cuts there.

"The Greenhouse exploded." He filled him in. "The fire somehow got inside it, and the pressure burst it outwards. You were too close and got knocked out by the blast."

James' eyes grew wider at Severus' explanation, and he swallowed thickly, but said nothing. Eventually, he turned to the Headmaster, who nodded his head once and gave James a small smile.

"I apologise for my earlier abruptness, mister Potter." He said. "I am glad to see you awake, but I must stress how difficult it is for us to comprehend why the greenhouse was on fire to begin with. I know Fiendfyre when I see it, and I would just like to understand how and why you were experimenting with it."

James looked just about ready to burst into tears, and Severus could understand that haven just woken up, being questioned by the Headmaster about dark magic, would definitely be stressful. He squeezed gently on the Gryffindor's fingers in an attempt to convey that he supported him. James glanced down at the motion, and then shrugged his shoulders. For a second he looked like he was going to tell the Headmaster a lie, but then everything began pouring out of him – fast and desperate, like he needed to get the truth out or it would poison him.

He explained, in a rush, about meeting with Peter over the holidays and he confessed to cursing the ring, and how the traitor had named other people who had other artefacts of Voldemort's. He glossed over how, not wanting to land Regulus in any trouble, but told Dumbledore that they, as a group, had managed to track down the locket, and put together what it was. He then explained that they had destroyed it, but never mentioned the cave, or the false Horcrux they had stored there.

"So, that's why I was using Fiendfyre. I knew we had to think of a powerful spell that could destroy it beyond repair." He mumbled at the end. Dumbledore hummed low in his throat.

"And you thought of Fiendfyre."

James shrugged helplessly.

"I found the spell in a book... when I was doing research on fire-based curses... because of my illness." He lied. He glanced across to Severus, who caught eye-contact and gave a small, barely noticeable nod.

Dumbledore sighed.

"I see. Well I can't say I'm entirely happy with the damage to Hogwarts property, but if what you say is true, then I can't think of a better cause for it to be so." He said, with a note of finality. "Now, tell me James, what else did Peter tell you, about these artefacts of Lord Voldemort's?"

James fiddled nervously with his sheets.

"He said... Um, he named some names. Said that Lucius Malfoy had a... a book, a diary." He replied, frowning as he tried to remember. "And that Bellatrix LeStrange and her husband... they had one. I can't... I think it was a goblet."

Dumbledore nodded understandably.

"Do you remember anything else?" He pushed. James shook his head.

"Just that the youngest Death Eaters were given them. That it was like an initiation. They were supposed to protect them in some way." He replied.

"And what of the ring?" Dumbledore asked, looking at James intently now, and Severus coughed loudly, making James look to him, because the Slytherin had suddenly got the impression their Headmaster was trying to use Legilimency on his boyfriend. James quirked a half-smile at Severus, and then turned back to Dumbledore.

"I'm not sure, Peter has it still, I guess. I cursed it with, um... with the poison-death curse." He confessed. Pomfrey, who had been standing nearby, let out a small huff at the confession, but Dumbledore seemed unconcerned, as if he had suspected as much.

"Think about the ring itself, James." He ordered. "Could you describe it to me?"

Severus thought, for a moment, that it was an odd question, but then thought to himself that Dumbledore was probably going to try and track it down and destroy it. James nodded along eagerly.

"Yeah, it was weird looking." He replied. "It was gold, and had this like... jet black stone inlaid in it. But someone had engraved something on the stone. Sort of a... like a cats-eye type of thing. I kind of recognised it, but couldn't place where."

Dumbledore had edged forward on his seat and was looking at James with an almost hungry look now. He waved his wand through the air and out of nowhere he produced parchment, quill and ink. He handed them to the recovering Gryffindor.

"Could you draw it for me, the symbol?" He asked. James nodded, taking the parchment and scratching out the drawing.

Severus looked over his shoulder to see a triangle, with a circle in the middle, and a line vertically down the centre. It did look a little cats-eye like, but it also filled Severus with an odd sense of foreboding. James handed the drawing back to the Headmaster, who took it in his hands and looked down.

"Yes." He said, under his breath, and then seemed to snap out of it and turned to the teenagers with a serene smile. "Thank you for this, mister Potter. Now, I am sure you need your rest. I will allow you and mister Snape your privacy, but don't begrudge our Madame Pomfrey her right as a healer to demand you rest." He warned jovially, standing and exiting the room.

Severus watched him go, and then watched as Pomfrey gave James a once over, and said Severus could have a few minutes alone with him. The second she was out of sight Severus pushed forwards and gave James a kiss.

"Hmm. Hello." James mumbled as they broke apart again. Severus shook his head.

"You're an idiot." He said, but the insult was taken out of it by the lazy smirk on his features. He sat back in his chair and just surveyed James for a moment, then sighed. "You worried me." He confessed.

James bit his lip, but it did very little to stop the grin forming on his face.

"It's kind of my job now." He replied, then he frowned and looked down at the sheets. "I think it's getting worse. Cinis, I mean. Everything's getting so overwhelming, and every time I make a small victory, something else comes along to mess it up. Now... now I've got this whole Fiendfyre thing going on, and you think it's to do with Cinis." He broke off, swallowing thickly. "Sev, you said the other day that I'm probably the longest standing case of someone living with the disease... what happened to the other people?"

Severus took a deep, slow breath, trying not to let it show how much he didn't want to answer that question. He knew as soon as he'd said it that James would pick up on it, and had been waiting for this line of questioning, but it didn't mean he was ready for it. He sat back heavily and gave James a worried look.

"What you have to understand, is that Flamouriades is incredibly rare – no one knows how it's contracted, and as you know, there is no cure – only ways of dealing with the symptoms." He began, slowly. He cleared his throat before continuing. "I've only ever known one other person who had it, but there have been a smattering of cases around the UK – and obviously I was aware of them, due to my apprenticeship with Kindhall."

James nodded. Severus carried on.

"I've read of 'outbreaks' of the disease, over the course of the couple of hundred years we've been aware of it – or at least this mutation of it – and the fact that these outbreaks have a geographical pattern do suggest that it can be 'caught' - but still no one knows how. There's been a few theories, because a lot of people have researched it, but nothing concrete – and in part, it is my belief, that that is due to how little time most people had the disease before... perishing."

James winced at the word perishing, but then sighed and said:

"Okay, so loads of people only got like, a week, before dying, because they didn't have the Elixir that Kindhall made. But what about those that did have access to the Elixir? How come they didn't survive? I mean, he created that like..." He trailed off.

"About forty year ago, he would have started handing out the prototypes, when he came across a case." Severus told him, "And yes, you're right. There were lots of people who got a much longer time, because of the Elixir, but then the disease found other ways to kill them. I told you once, a long time ago, that Cinis would try and starve you out. Many people died of starvation, before we realised it was connected. After that it was a series of accidents, which we believe were caused by

sleep deprivation, again, due to Cinis. There has, however, been one or two cases of people living with the disease for about a year, before..."

James looked at him, dead in the eye, and Severus found himself unable to keep eye-contact. Shamefully, he turned away.

"Before what, Sev?"

Severus shook his head ruefully.

"Before their symptoms increased, no longer being held at bay by the Elixir, and they either died from exhaustion, or made the decision to end their own lives."

No one seemed to be breathing. The hospital wing was eerily quiet, and James seemed to have stopped functioning. He stared at Severus for a long time, and then gently moved his head and stared out of the window by his bed for an even longer time, until Severus coughed gently to try and get his attention. Finally, the Gryffindor breathed.

"And that... that happened at about a year after they first presented?"

Severus nodded.

"You had gone past that anniversary without telling me of any of your symptoms worsening so I... I allowed myself to believe that you would be okay."

James' hand clenched into a fist around his sheets and he huffed gently.

"Last August you sold my mother and father a potion, telling them that I would be perfectly fine if I kept drinking it every week. At no point, during everything we've gone through, did you think to tell me that actually you were just delaying my death for a year?" He seethed. Severus winced, and James shakily brought a hand up to his face and wiped at his cheeks, wiping away a couple of stray tears. "All those orders you made me do, telling me they fucking saved my life... and actually I was just... putting off my death!"

Severus made a strangled sound in his throat, standing in an attempt to explain to James that he hadn't thought of it that way, and that he had stopped the orders the second he realised how deeply he felt for the other boy, but instead he said:

"There's no guarantee that you'll follow how those other Cinis-patients did."

James turned to glare at him, and Severus took a step back, because his usually brown pupils had turned blood-red, and he seethed in anger, shouting his next words.

"Except I have! I am getting worse!" He yelled, and then his eyes dulled back down to brown and he turned away from Severus.

"James." The Slytherin said, weakly. James didn't turn around.

"You should go." He told the boy. "Before I accidentally set something on fire."

Severus made a noise of protest, but at that moment an actual fireball erupted from James' hand and the boy yelled;

"Go!"

And so Severus left.

Several months passed. Remus was outed to the school rather abruptly when his younger boyfriend turned up in the Great Hall for breakfast a couple of days after the events of the 'Horcrux Burning' as Sirius had dubbed it, seen Sirius play-flirting with Remus, and had angrily stomped over to 'stake his claim' in the form of a heavy-duty lip-locking.

Remus had decided it was definitely worth it, because now he could (and would) eye up the boy whenever he saw him in corridors, and make use of all available wall space for make-out sessions. The two of them were on cloud nine, being back together, and although they still hadn't moved on to the next step, physically, Remus was much more content to move at a slower pace, now he didn't have a dormant mating mark making him unintentionally angry or horny.

It was nice, as well, to be in a relationship for the first time where secrets were completely non-existent. Regulus had been entirely upfront with him about everything that happened to make him join the Death Eaters, and everything he had been involved with because of them since. Somehow the boy had managed to go to another meeting and had not been murdered by Voldemort yet, either, which was a massive plus. The other hand of it, with Regulus' divination abilities, it meant Remus never had to worry about keeping anything from him either. Disregarding his lycanthropy, Regulus only had to touch him to know if he was having a bad day, or wanted to spend the rest of the evening kissing every bit of skin on his young boyfriend that he could reasonably reach.

At the next available full-moon Severus had put wards in place to help him get samples from Remus to keep production of Wolf's Bane going, and between Severus and Remus the potion was going incredibly well.

All in all, the months had passed happily for the two of them. And Remus only wished he could say the same for his friends.

James hadn't spoken to Severus since January. Each week he trundled down to the the dungeons and collected his Elixir – and each week Severus would plead with him to let them talk it out, but James was incredibly stubborn. It was now the beginning of May, and the two still had yet to make up. Remus had sat down with Severus, who had explained that James was upset with him due to things that had been kept from him about Cinis, and had implored Remus to keep him updated if James' symptoms got any worse. Remus had kept an eye out, but James didn't like to talk about his illness, and he didn't seem to be overly suffering.

Sometimes he woke up in the night due to nightmares. Sometimes he would barely eat. Remus was getting pretty good at his Alpha-tone, however, and had assured Severus he was putting it to good use in reminding James to take care of himself.

On the other hand there was Sirius and Lily.

Remus was still battling with a large amount of guilt over their situation. He had spoken to Sirius about confessing to the girl, but Sirius had shot him down, saying he didn't want to break her heart, and since it had all been done under the influence of the mark, then it didn't really count as an affair.

Remus begged to differ, but it didn't think it was his place to meddle in his friends relationship. Sirius had confessed that during the Easter break he had stayed at Lily's house, and he had finally helped her lose her virginity. It hadn't made Remus feel any better, and by the strained awkwardness between the Sirius and Lily since returning to school, it hadn't helped Sirius move on either. They hadn't broken up, but they seemed to be constantly bickering, and then making up, and

Remus wasn't sure how long their relationship would last if Sirius wasn't being honest with her.

On top of that, Remus had now begun to study in earnest for his HEAT. He was due to sit it at the end of June, and had managed to rope in Severus to give him extra help in Potions. He was sat, currently, in the NEWTS Potions classroom, with Severus instructing him on the importance of a steady-stir, and Regulus swinging his legs over the side of a desk and reading what looked like a cheesy romance novel.

"So, if it says counter-clockwise it's best to cut down the middle first, and then start your next steps." Severus was instructing him, when there was a loud bang from outside, and then a startled scream.

Instinctively, they abandoned the project, and sprinted up the dungeon steps to the entrance hall, and the source of the commotion. As soon as they reached the hall they saw James, in the middle of the hall. He had his hands out, looking down at them in concentration, and was shaking violently, but more than that, he was entirely engulfed in flames.

"Augamenti!" Someone yelled, but the water just evaporated before he it even reached him. James looked up at the third year who had yelled it, and then she screamed and began scrambling away. Remus could see why, James' pupils were blood-red, and he looked almost as if he was controlling the flames.

A flickering, fiery dragon's head emerged from the otherwise shapeless fire, and snarled at them all. Remus pushed Regulus a little further behind him, and then began to make his way closer to his friend.

"James! What's going on?" He asked, shouting over the commotion. The Quidditch Captain turned his red eyes to him, and then, passed him, to Severus.

Then, just as if someone had doused him in water, the flames flickered out and James was left steaming, shaking, his eyes returning to normal. He fell to his knees, and Severus rushed passed Remus' shoulder towards him.

"It's getting worse." James told him, and Remus took a deep breath and turned to the small crowd.

"All right, just a stupid hex gone wrong. It looked scary but it's all fine. Nothing to see here!" He told them, beginning to usher them away. He kept his werewolf-hearing trained on James and Severus though, who were talking quietly.

"James... I'm sure I can help. Maybe we need to up the dosage, or something... if you talked to me about what's happening, maybe I can find a way to..." Severus muttered.

"Cure me? There is no cure." James interrupted him. "Maybe it's time, Sev."

Remus whirled around at the tone of his voice, to see Severus swallowing thickly and shaking his head, his long fingers curled around the sleeves of James' robes.

"Don't say that." He demanded. James went to say something else, but then Snape bowed his head and said, quite loudly and with determination. "I am *ordering* you to live, James. I'm not accepting you trying to quit now. The fact that you've survived this long past the year is testament enough to your strength of will. Work with me and together we'll find a way to help you – but you're not giving up now. I'm ordering you not to give up!"

He dragged James to his feet and together with Remus, with Regulus trailing along behind, they pulled him down into the dungeons, to some semblance of privacy. Once there, James sat on a

chair, looking utterly defeated and tired to the bone.

"Tell us what happened." Severus commanded.

James nodded, chewing on his lip thoughtfully.

"One of my main symptoms was the emotions. I was constantly volleying between being okay and thinking that it would be better off if I just... ended it. It made me angry and upset, and was causing a lot of accidental magic to spill from me. It had gone beyond blowing up cabinets, and now I was constantly setting things on fire. I needed a safe way to let it out." He explained. "I noticed if I made Fiendfyre, and channelled all of my emotions into it, then the next couple of days I felt better. So I've been going into the forest, as a stag. There's a clearing there, where I can put up some wards and then conjure up my dragon. I've never hurt anyone with it, and it helps me control the anger issues. But the more I use it... the more I want to use it. I guess it's like... an addiction. I was in the hall just now and something happened to upset me, and then 'bam', just like that the fire had overtaken me. It's... beyond my control."

Severus frowned.

"So you conjure Fiendfyre, and then the next day you don't feel as emotionally charged?" He confirmed. James nodded.

"Except, like I said, I'm having to do it more and more. It's not enough to just summon the dragon to the size of a Quaffle any more – he needs to be bigger, and hotter, just to get the same effect."

Remus hummed in his throat. That did sound like an addiction.

Severus took a couple of steps towards where James was sitting on a chair, and knelt down between his legs, taking his hands in his and brushing his thumbs over them. He looked up and James and smiled, which seemed odd for someone who had just been told his boyfriends symptoms of his incredibly deadly disease were getting worse and were much less manageable.

"James... I think I know a way to help you." He confessed. "We've been looking at it all wrong. We've been trying to fight fire with ice, but that's wrong. You have to fight fire with fire."

James shook his head a little woefully.

"Is there really a point in keeping fighting at all?" He asked, looking incredibly depressed. Severus held on tighter to his fingers.

"Yes, of course." He replied.

James snorted in self-deprecating amusement.

"Really? Why is that?" He asked.

Severus leant upwards and gently kissed his lips.

"Because, I love you."

Remus pulled Regulus close to him, wrapping a protective arm around his shoulders, as James sobbed gently and nodded. He wasn't sure what the next stage of this whole messy situation would bring, but he was sure James and Severus would see it out together, because love conquers all.

Summary:

James becomes ill, and Snape is the only one who can keep him alive. Of course, Severus will only help him for a price.